

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

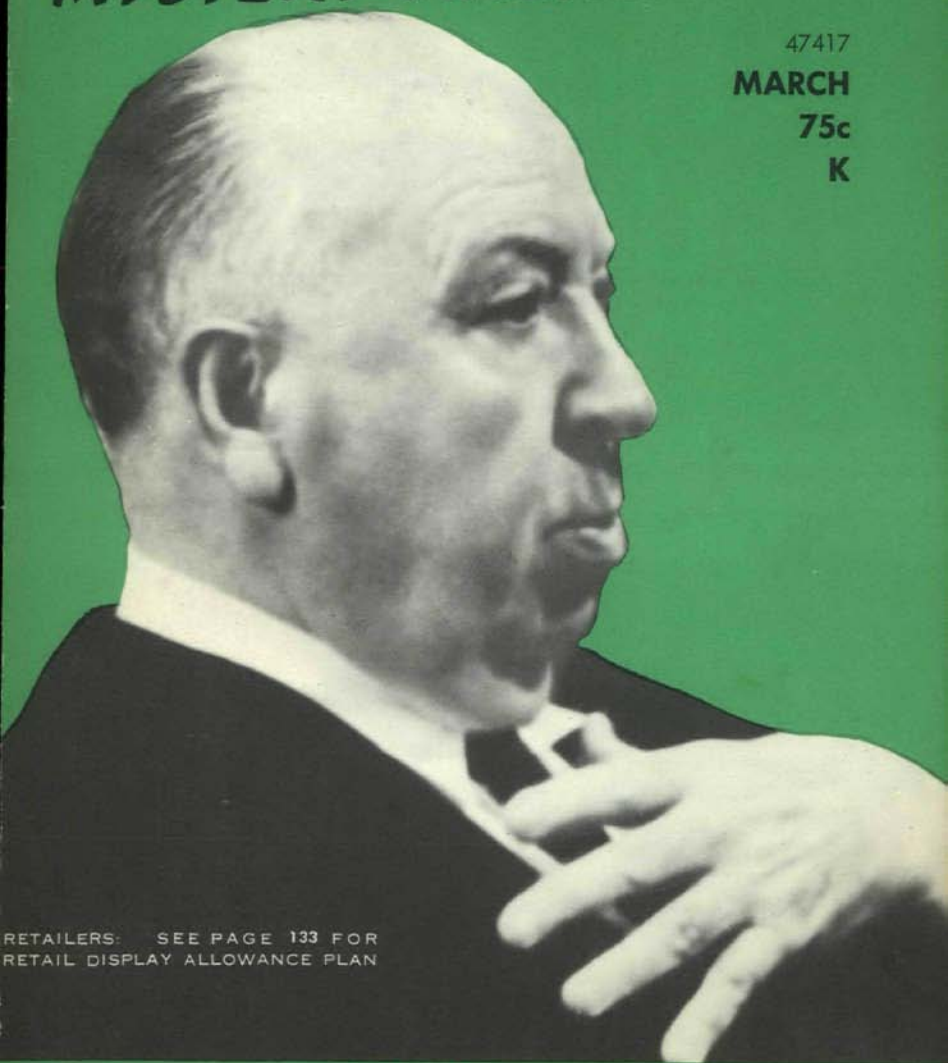
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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RETAILERS: SEE PAGE 133 FOR
RETAIL DISPLAY ALLOWANCE PLAN

EW stories presented by the MASTER OF SUSPENSE

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March 1974

Dear Reader:

If it happens to be the wearin' o' the *spleen* that interests you, there is a virtual parade of such sartorial miscreants in this month's new stories. Those you will encounter within are not backward about venting the stuff of their true selves, and they do not make the grade here by virtue of their morals.

Despite—or perhaps because of—certain shortcomings elsewhere, travel may be enjoyed this month without leaving your favorite chair. From *The Ghost of Lost Creek Castle* by Richard O. Lewis to the novelette by Bill Pronzini titled *The Riverboat Gold Robbery*, you will be whisked to many places, including back in time. Thus it will be shown that malefactors have never observed geographical bounds.

If various shortages do plague you, take heart. The production of suspense goes on. The wells of your favorite authors are not tapped out, as you will soon witness. Color all other manufacturers and suppliers green.

Good reading.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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It frequently happens that the ghosts of one's childhood are not always laid as permanently as one would hope.

The Ghost of Lost Creek Castle

We had barely moved into the little house on the acreage we had rented from Mike Fedrow before my father began warning me never to go near a certain stone structure that stood alone and forlorn in a field a half mile or so away from us.

"That old house is haunted," he told me. "Just full of ghosts and things that could very well eat up a young fellow like you."

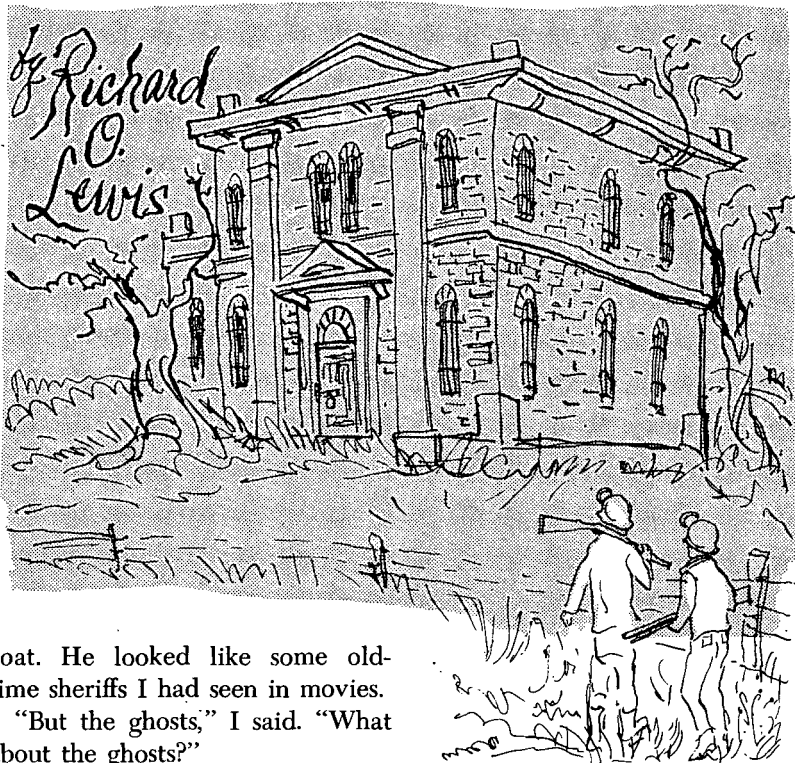
Being only eleven or twelve years old, I naturally believed him and made a solemn vow never to go near the place. Still, I was full of questions. What kind of ghosts were they? Why did they haunt the house? Who had lived there?

Hank Bailey, the county sheriff, an old friend of my father's, became a frequent visitor at our house on weekends when my father was home from working at

his job some thirty miles away, and it was through them and my mother that I finally got a few odds and ends of information—enough, at least, to satisfy partially my curiosity.

"It used to be a sort of night-club a couple years ago," my father said. "People used to go there to drink and carouse around."

"It being illegal to sell liquor in the state," said Sheriff Bailey, drinking coffee at our kitchen table, "we had to close up the place." He was a tall, lanky man with a handlebar moustache. He always wore a wide-brimmed hat, and a big gun holstered in a bullet-studded belt, and sported a great silvery badge on his shirt or



coat. He looked like some old-time sheriffs I had seen in movies.

"But the ghosts," I said. "What about the ghosts?"

Sheriff Bailey took off his hat and placed it upside down on the table. "When we raided the place, well, a—a couple people got killed . . ."

The hair at the back of my neck began prickling with excitement. I knew the sheriff was a good shot, because once when a small rabbit began hopping across our back yard the sheriff had whipped out his gun and shot him dead center. Although I admired his marksmanship, I was somewhat saddened that he hadn't se-

lected some target other than a baby rabbit to prove his ability. "And did you kill some of 'em?"

I could tell by the way my father's eyes darkened and narrowed that he didn't like what I had asked. "You better go outside and play," he said. "The sheriff and I are busy."

My "play" for the next several days consisted mostly of suddenly throwing open the door of the hen house or tool shed, whisking an imaginary gun from my hip,

pointing it inside, and going, "Bang, bang, bang!" But somehow, it didn't seem just right. You just didn't throw doors open and start shooting people . . .

I still had some questions concerning the old stone house. "Why doesn't someone live there now?" I asked my mother one day when we were working in the garden we tended while my father was away at work during the week.

She straightened from her hoeing and pushed the straw hat back from her moist, freckled brow. "I guess nobody really owns it," she said.

"But *somebody's* got to own it!" I reasoned.

Mother shook her head. "The owner was killed during the raid, and the court put an injunction on the place so nobody could use it. Mike Fedrow bought the land around it, but he couldn't buy the house because of the injunction, and so it just stands there, padlocked."

"I see," I said, as if I knew all about injunctions—which, of course, I didn't. "And is it really full of ghosts and haunts and things?"

Mother resumed her hoeing. "That's what people say. Anyway, don't you go bothering around there."

Later that afternoon, I strolled

down the road to Otto Moline's house. He and I, being the only two boys in a radius of several miles, had become almost constant companions during our leisure hours.

Otto, I had found, was a mechanical genius. He was a year older than I, taller, sturdier, and had short, black curls that fit his head like a tight stocking cap. Thus far, before my arrival in the area, he had built several small carts and wagons, a dam across Little Lost Creek, a cave in one of the banks of the creek, a tree house, a rickety log cabin, and numerous other smaller projects. His brain seemed filled with wheels, levers, nuts, bolts, nails, boards, pieces of iron pipe, discarded farm machinery—all of which, somehow, had to be fitted together.

As far as I was concerned, however, his greatest achievement was the forge he had recently constructed, and as I neared his house that afternoon I could hear the busy clang of hammer against anvil. So I ambled down the lane, climbed over the gate, and went to the corner of the barn lot where he was hard at work transforming some teeth from an old hay rake into daggers and Roman broadswords.

I sat down on a nearby stump,

got a file from the toolbox, and began sharpening one of the tempered daggers. The roof of the stone house was plainly visible beyond a ridge of plowed field and, due to the recent talk with my mother, the subject was still fresh in my mind.

"Ever been there?" I asked, nodding my head toward the distant roof.

Otto let the handle of the cream separator idle, thus stopping the blast of air from the fan on its spindle through the section of waterspouting to the firebox, and sizzled a blade in the water trough to temper it. "It belongs to the government or something. I'm not supposed to go there."

I put the file and the dagger on the workbench Otto had constructed from a discarded feed box and got to my feet. Then we went to the gate, climbed over it, and walked up the lane. We had reached a silent agreement. Neither of us would have dared to venture near the stone structure alone, but now there was courage in numbers.

"Sheriff Bailey and my father say the place is haunted, full of ghosts and things," I said as we started down the steep hill toward the stone culvert that spanned the creek.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Otto

said, his practical mind working.

"I'll bet they're there, all right,"

I said, a slight tremor of excitement running through me.

"Maybe we'll get to see one!"

We began trudging up the long hill ahead of us, our toes kicking through the dust of the dirt road.

"Do you like Sheriff Bailey?" Otto wanted to know.

I considered a moment. "He shot a baby rabbit in our yard one day," I said, as if that answered the question.

"He shoots people, too," Otto said. "And my father says that someday a friend or relative of someone he has shot is going to get even with him."

"You mean, shoot *him*?" I gasped.

Otto shrugged.

Halfway up the long hill we turned left into what had once been a lane leading through a densely wooded area. Picking our way silently through the tall, rank weeds that had grown up there, we finally reached the fence that Mike Fedrow had obviously stretched across the lane after buying the property beyond, and there, less than a hundred feet away in a vast, unkept yard that was bordered on three sides by corn fields, stood the house.

We clung to the fence and gazed at it. It was a formidable,

two-storied structure of heavy stone with narrow windows that were barred with iron rods spaced about six inches apart. It looked more like an abandoned fortress than a house.

"The owner of the Lost Creek Coal Company built it," Otto said. "People called it The Castle. After the mine played out, the owner sold it to the people who turned it into a nightclub. Now, I guess, nobody owns it."

There was no movement or sound; just a deathlike silence, as if all the ghosts were asleep somewhere in the bat-filled interior.

We finally summoned up enough courage to go over the fence and approach the place, leaving a trail of broken and bent weeds behind us. After all, the sun was still high in the sky, and ghosts generally confine their activities to the midnight hours.

The door was of heavy oak. A hinged hasp had been bolted to it, and a ponderous padlock clung securely to its staple. We tried to peer through the windows, but they were beyond our reach. We made our way completely around the house but found no entrance. It was indeed an impregnable "castle."

When we neared the oaken door again, Otto suddenly grasped my arm and pointed. There was a

faint trail of broken weeds leading northward from the door. "Someone has been here," he whispered.

"Ghosts?" I said, preparing to flee.

"Ghosts don't leave trails," Otto reasoned.

"Looks like it was made a few days ago," I guessed. "Saturday or Sunday."

"There's a road a half mile or so north of here," Otto said. "Whoever made the trail came from that direction."

"Maybe Sheriff Bailey came to check the lock," I suggested. "We'd better get out of here."

"Right!" Otto said, heading back toward the fence. "If Bailey catches us here, he'd probably shoot us on the spot!"

We didn't visit The Castle again that summer. We were too busy with other activities. Armed with our broadswords and tin shields, we captured all of Gaul. Then with arrows tipped with forged points of iron, we became Sitting Bull's war-whooping braves, with Custer as our sitting duck . . .

Late in the fall, after we had begun trudging the two miles to country school and back, several notable things happened. First, my grandfather died, and an ancient muzzle-loading shotgun that had belonged to him was handed

down to me. Immediately afterward, one of Otto's numerous uncles presented him with a long-barreled, cap-and-ball, Kentucky-type rifle and a bullet mold. The guns had been given to us more or less as keepsakes, but Otto had both of them working as good as new in less than a week.

Most notable, however, was the fact that my father traded in our old pickup truck on a brand-new sedan! Considering that we were still in the depression years and that we had always been short of money, the purchase of the new car was little short of a miracle. We now went to town more often on weekends when my father was home from work.

Otto and I pooled our resources, and with the extra spending money my father now gave me when we went to town, I was able to purchase occasional supplies of caps and black powder for our guns.

Gone were the days of Indian war paint; we were now Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and a host of other bold frontiersmen, all rolled into one.

What we desperately needed now to complete our new identities were coonskin caps, and so, with the aid of carbide lights and miners' caps supplied by my father, we began searching the

woods at night, shining our lights high into the trees in hope of catching the reflection from the eyes of the unwary raccoon. We never succeeded in catching any in this manner, but it was great sport trying—until the night the ghost crippled me.

We had been hunting in the big woods north of the long hill and had no intention of going near The Castle; but in our wanderings, we unexpectedly found ourselves standing by Mike Fedrow's fence, and there, foreboding and ghostly in the cold starlight, stood the massive stone structure.

Suddenly I swept off my miner's lamp, put out the flame, and clutched Otto by the arm. "Put out your light!" I whispered. "Look!"

Otto killed his light instantly. "What—what is it?"

"The first window to the right of the door!" I gasped. "I saw a light there!"

We strained our eyes through the darkness, but if there had really been a light there, it had now vanished.

"A reflection of your own light from a windowpane," Otto reasoned. "Ghosts don't need lights."

"I know they don't," I said. "But they glow in the dark. I've seen 'em in the movies . . ."

It was then that the eerie, ear-splitting shriek shattered the silence, bringing the hair at the back of my neck to an upright position. It was unlike any human or animal shriek I had ever heard. It could have been torn from the depths of a tortured soul in the abyss of hell.

We didn't wait to analyze its origin. Although Otto was armed with the long rifle, we wanted no showdown with a bunch of ghosts that were probably, even now, streaming through those stone walls to bring us to a ghastly, untimely end.

We took to our heels and raced pell-mell into the inky blackness of the old lane. Either the sound of the shriek was still ringing in my ears or its owner was directly at my back—I couldn't tell which—but I had taken no more than a half dozen running leaps before something grabbed me by my right foot, twisted it violently, and sent me crashing headlong into the rank weeds.

My throat was dry and constricted. I gasped for air, unable to scream out my panic.

Otto must have heard me thud to the ground, for he paused for a second in indecision, raced back, put an arm around me, and brought me to my feet. Then, hobbling and hopping and run-

ning, we reached the road and went down it without stopping until we reached the abutment of the culvert at the bottom of the hill. There we sank down to catch our breath.

I held my foot in both hands while excruciating pain shot up my leg as far as my knee.

"Did you trip over something?" Otto wanted to know.

"No!" I wailed. "A ghost got me! It was right behind me! Screaming in my ear!"

Otto constructed a pair of crutches for me and I used them to hobble to and from school, hiding them each afternoon before I returned home. I forced myself not to limp in the presence of my parents lest they force me to tell them where and how I had sustained my injury.

As spring approached and warm weather began to set in, Otto got a faraway, dreamy look in his eyes, and I knew from experience that he was building something in his head, something I wouldn't know about until its completion, when he would show it to me with a grand flourish.

The "grand flourish" came late one morning a couple weeks after school had closed for summer vacation. After conducting me to the tool shed where he had stored his forge and workbench for win-

ter usage, Otto strode to the middle of the floor, gripped the edge of a canvas cover, whipped it aside—and there stood his masterpiece.

My mouth dropped open in amazement. It was beyond my wildest dreams! It was *beautiful*!

It consisted of a two-by-six plank, sawed, shaped, and greased at the ends to form an axle between two iron wheels from an old corn planter. Crisscrossing the plank and securely bolted to it was another two-by-six, tapered at one end, and along it and extending a foot beyond the tapered end was a piece of water pipe of galvanized iron fully three feet in length and with an inch-and-a-half bore. It was anchored firmly to its wooden frame with two heavy strips of bolted strap iron and its breach was a thick plug of melted lead reinforced by a block of two-by-four bolted into place directly behind it. A third length of two-by-six, hinged to the wooden axle, led backward and downward, its slotted end housing a third and much smaller wheel that rested on the floor.

“A *cannon*!” I gasped; and in the next excited breath, “Will it shoot?”

“Of course,” Otto said, looking at me as if annoyed that I should ask such a silly question.

He took hold of the short piece of rope that was stapled to the frame just above the third wheel and pulled on it. The wheel came up, and Otto dragged the piece backward out of the door on its two major wheels and into the barn lot.

“You cock it up on its hind wheel to load it,” Otto instructed.

I took hold of the corn-planter wheels and hoisted them up until the cannon was resting entirely on its rear wheel, its barrel pointing straight upward.

Otto poured in two palmsful of black powder, inserted a wad of paper, and tamped it home with a length of broomstick. Then he dropped in a heavy, rusty bolt and another wadding of paper. It was easy to see that the muzzle-loading shotgun and rifle had given rise to the idea for the cannon.

After I had eased the wheels back to the ground, Otto pointed the piece at the side of the barn, some fifty feet away. He unloosened a wing nut at the side of the frame, elevated the barrel a bit above horizontal, and tightened the nut again.

“We need fuse,” Otto said, twisting a few grains of powder into a wisp of paper. “But maybe this’ll work.” He inserted the makeshift squib into the fuse hole

he had drilled on the top of the barrel a half inch or so in front of the breach and touched a match to it.

We took immediate refuge behind a woodpile and stuck our heads up just high enough to peep over it. The paper sputtered for two or three seconds, then BOOM-thud! The gun leaped off the ground two or three inches and recoiled backward a foot or more. But it hadn't exploded! It was intact!

We raced down to the barn and found a ragged hole where the bolt, turning in its flight, had struck crosswise and had gone through a pine board as if through tissue paper.

"Whew!" I whistled. "We've got to be careful where we aim that thing!"

We fired the gun three or four more times that day, testing for distance and accuracy, and then there was nothing else to do but sit on the edge of a watering trough and view our masterpiece, for we had run out of powder. Where the shotgun and long rifle had used powder by mere thimbleful, the cannon consumed it by the handful! Otto had created a monster. Considering our limited resources, we simply couldn't afford to shoot it.

It was then, during our darkest

hour, that I got a sudden inspiration. "Mike Fedrow's coal mine," I whispered. "Mike took my father and me into the mine last fall to show us around, and there is blasting powder and fuse . . ."

That night, as silent as shadows, we rode our bicycles westward over the dark hills.

The Fedrow house was on a little knoll a quarter of a mile north of the road. There were no lights, for Mike and his three bachelor sons went to bed with the coming of darkness, to rise again at the approach of dawn. Their entire lives seemed to be ruled by a dedication to work and a compulsion to accumulate land.

The entrance to the mine lay about fifty feet south of the road and, moments after hiding our bicycles in the weeds, we were picking our way carefully down the slope of the black tunnel, bending low to avoid the low roof and lighting our way with our carbide lamps.

We found what we were looking for in one of the rooms that opened off the main entry. Otto pulled a tarp aside from two kegs of thick-grained blasting powder and a box of dynamite sticks packed in sawdust and we set to work.

When we finally left the mine,

we had a two-quart jar of powder and a goodly length of coiled fuse. In various pockets of our trousers and shirts we also had four sticks of dynamite and a half dozen blasting caps.

We pushed our bicycles all the way home that night, fearful to ride them lest we sustain a fall that would blow us to Kingdom Come.

Happy, exciting, and noisy days followed, and my foot had healed sufficiently so that I didn't limp anymore. Sometimes at night, however, I suffered a twinge of pain that gave rise to a recurring nightmare wherein a shrieking ghost held my foot and twisted it, and I was neither able to run nor to cry out. For some reason, Sheriff Bailey was always in the background, hand on gun, grinning.

We graduated quickly from bold frontiersmen directly to captains of artillery, serving alternately under Generals Lee and Grant. We christened our field piece "Boomer," and it lived up to its name resoundingly. Then one day, right in the middle of the siege of Vicksburg, Otto's father happened by, paused to cast a critical eye on Boomer, and our hearts sank.

"It's just a toy gun," Otto explained, tongue in cheek. "It doesn't really do much of any-

thing. Just makes a lot of noise."

Seemingly satisfied, Mr. Moline nodded, continued on his way, and we were home free to carry on the war.

We reduced the pea-sized grains of blasting powder into the finer, quick-firing type simply by running it through an old hand-operated coffee grinder. Our supply seemed assured. Even if the Fedrows did detect their loss, it would not be until late fall, when they resumed work in the mine to supply local customers with fuel for the winter months.

One day, Otto unearthed a length of heavy copper tubing with an outer diameter large enough to fit snugly into Boomer's throat, and I watched genius at work. He hacksawed a six-inch cylinder from the tubing, hammered a wooden plug into one end, poured in a quantity of powder, drilled a fuse hole into another wooden plug, seated the plug firmly into the open end of the cylinder with the aid of a vise, inserted a short fuse through the fuse hole—and the explosive shell was born!

Eagerly, we cocked Boomer up on its rear wheel and loaded it. Otto split the short fuse of the shell wide open, dropped the missile down the barrel, and tamped it home. "When the powder in

the gun goes off," Otto explained, "it will automatically light the fuse of the bomb at the same time it sends it on its way."

It did. The explosive shells worked wonderfully well, even though they did little more than blow out both wooden plugs with a satisfactory *bang*, leaving the cylinders intact for reloading.

After several days spent in bombarding the high hills of Vicksburg, we finally screwed up enough courage to load a shell with dynamite and a blasting cap. We were fearful lest Boomer's concussion might detonate the dynamite and cap prematurely, thus reducing our masterpiece to a pile of junk with a shattered barrel, but we knew we couldn't rest until we found out for certain.

When all was in readiness, we wheeled Boomer into position beside the barn, aimed it at a large rock protruding from the bank of the creek a couple hundred feet away, and touched a match to its fuse. Then we took instant refuge inside the barn and hurried to the south windows through which our target was plainly visible.

There came a familiar *boom*, indicating all was well with the gun, then a puff of dust six inches left of the rock and a tiny wisp of smoke from a burning fuse.

Hearts pounding with ex-

pectation, we waited—and nothing happened.

"Fuse must have gone out," said Otto.

"Maybe not," I reasoned. "Might just be hanging fire. My father once told me that fuses sometimes act that way. Smolder for a long time before the powder catches on again."

"We better go have a look."

"My father said that miners have got killed that way . . ."

A few minutes later, our patience exhausted, we went down to the creek and began scrambling up the sloping embankment. The shell was lying peacefully beside the rock, its metal hull gleaming in the sun.

"Don't see any smoke," Otto said, sticking his head up for a closer look. "Fuse must be completely out."

My nerves had begun to tingle. "My father says never to approach, even if the fuse seems to be out . . ."

It was like a sudden bolt of lightning striking close at hand. The violent CRACK, peculiar to exploding dynamite, nearly shattered my eardrums, and I fell against the embankment to huddle beside Otto. It was over in an instant, and we sat up, surprised that we were still alive.

"Boy!" breathed Otto, brushing

dirt from his curly hair. "Something whizzed right past my head!"

We scrambled up to the rock and found a depression about six inches deep beside it, with wisps of some kind of vapor rising from the blasted, moist earth. Only a single piece of jagged copper shell was in evidence.

I suddenly clutched my lame foot in both hands and closed my eyes tightly. During the excitement of the exploding shell, I must have twisted it in some way, for excruciating pain was now stabbing and throbbing through it. "Damn that ghost!" I muttered, wondering if my foot would ever be well again. "It must have broken some bones or something when it grabbed me!"

When the pain had finally subsided a bit, I opened my eyes to find Otto staring at me in a rather odd, preoccupied manner and, as had happened many times in the past, I knew instantly the thoughts that were forming in his mind. Up until the present, the ghost, or ghosts, of Lost Creek Castle had held the winning hand, had sent us running in panic and had broken my foot, but now, with the help of Boomer, we had a definite and decisive means of retaliation . . .

Late Sunday afternoon, we

wheeled Boomer into position by Mike Fedrow's fence, loaded it with a six-inch, dynamite-filled shell, and aimed it directly at the window of The Castle where I had once seen the ghostly light. Knowing that ghosts come out only during the hours of darkness, we were not afraid that our preparations would be seen. When all was in readiness, we covered the gun with a strip of oilcloth to prevent fuse and powder from gathering moisture and left it in place.

An hour after my father had driven away that night for his week's work, Otto and I crept silently through the dark, weedy lane to find Boomer exactly the way we had left it.

"You can't really *kill* ghosts," Otto whispered, sweeping the oilcloth aside, "'cause they're already dead."

"But we can sure *scare* hell out of 'em!" I whispered back, my voice trembling with mounting fear.

Otto touched a match to Boomer's fuse, and we took instant refuge behind two trees we had selected earlier in the day. Again, I thought I saw a glow of light, but it could have been the reflection of a star . . .

Boomer's voice split the night. There came a tinkle of breaking

glass that was followed almost instantly by a muffled CRACK and a flash of light behind the windows of The Castle. Fully expecting ghosts to come flying out in all directions; I fled immediately, aching foot forgotten, while Otto wheeled Boomer into some bushes for concealment.

The high, spine-chilling shriek, more unearthly than before, reached my ears again. Then something was chasing me . . .

My pursuer turned out to be Otto. "Bet that shook 'em up!" he panted, catching up with me as I reached the road.

During the following week or so, a succession of events occurred that ended forever the relationship between Otto, Boomer, and me.

My father returned from work Monday morning, his face and one arm swathed in bandages. He said he had fallen down a rusty coal chute, had cut himself, and had been patched up by the camp doctor and sent home.

Otto's father came back from another trip to Colorado, announced that he had found the land he had been looking for, sold his farm to Mike Fedrow, and began packing up to move.

Otto and I fired Boomer for the last time. The thing that we had been fearful of happened. A dynamite shell detonated prematurely

in the barrel, and Boomer went out of existence in a lightninglike flash that left only the three iron wheels intact.

Word came that Sheriff Bailey, his life threatened by two gunmen, had disappeared from the county, leaving no trace as to his whereabouts.

When my father's wounds had begun to heal, we also moved, leaving the little acreage to take up residence in the town of Gainesville, some thirty miles away, where I finished grade school and, four years later, was graduated—with no honors to speak of—from the Gainesville high school. After leaving there, I had never gone back.

Now, because of whimsy and a letter from the alumni association which stated that the thirtieth anniversary of a graduating class was always, according to Gainesville tradition, a most important occasion, I was returning.

I was still miles away from my destination when I suddenly realized that I was nearing the little country road that led from the main highway over low hills through the area known as Lost Creek, where I had spent two fantastic years of my childhood. Overwhelming nostalgia laid hold

of me. I slowed down at the intersection and turned left.

After five minutes of bumping along over the dirt road, familiar sights began to appear. A new barn had been built at the Fedrow house on the knoll, but the coal mine, south of the road, had long ago caved in. During the years, Mike's customers had probably switched from coal to gas or oil heat, rendering the mine unprofitable.

Topping the last of a series of low hills, I came to the house where I had once lived. It was little more than a pile of rotting boards, half in and half out of what had once been a basement.

I didn't stop until I came to Otto's house. Doorless and windowless, it was still standing, its interior stacked with bales of hay and sacks of grain. I listened, but all was silent. The echoes of war whoops, battle cries, and cannon fire had gone from the hills forever.

The roof of The Castle, a half mile ahead and to the left of the road, caught my eye. I wondered if it had ever been put to use or if it still stood forlorn, padlocked against all intruders.

I drove down the steep hill, crossed the familiar culvert, and was halfway up the long hill when a growing compulsion caused me

to pull to the side of the road and stop. Knowing that I might never be in this area again, I could not resist having a final look at the stone structure which had housed the ghosts, real or imaginary, that had haunted my childhood.

What had once been a tangle of weeds was now a growth of tall trees and brush. I pushed my way through and smiled when I came to the spot where the "ghost"—or a hidden grapevine—had clutched my foot, twisted it, and broken a couple of bones.

The posts of the Fedrow fence had rotted, leaving rusting wires hanging listlessly to offer no barrier. I stepped over them and pushed my way through more trees and bushes until I finally reached the great door of The Castle. The huge padlock was still intact, and there was no evidence that the place had been visited for years on end, which was not strange considering that the Fedrow "boys" were, by now, in their early sixties, probably wholly incurious, and the only residents in the area.

Well, there was nothing to see, really. Just a door that seemed securely locked for all time . . .

I was about to retrace my steps when I noticed that the door-frame around the rusty hasp of the padlock had, like the posts of

the Fedrow fence, all but rotted away. Tentatively, I took hold of the lock and pulled. Hasp and lock came loose in my hand, bits of decayed wood clinging to the ancient bolts.

As a youth, I had longed to see what mystery lay behind that portal. Now, surrounded only by the silent woods, there was little to prevent me from satisfying my curiosity.

The door did not yield to my touch, and when I placed my shoulder against it and pushed, a piercing shriek rang out almost directly in my ears to cause the hair at the back of my neck to prickle. My fright was over in an instant when I realized that the shriek had not come from a ghostly throat; it had come from unoiled hinges protesting loudly against the swing of the ponderous door! It was the same eerie sound I had heard that night when I had injured my foot. Also the same one I had heard immediately after Boomer had sent an explosive shell crashing through a window. Obviously, someone had been in The Castle that night and had fled in panic, pausing only long enough to close and lock the door. But who? Sheriff Bailey, supposedly, was the only one who had a key to the lock . . .

The hinges squealed again as I

pushed the door farther open to peer into the gloomy interior. Tables and chairs lay upturned and scattered, with heaps and mounds of rotting rubbish among them. Ancient cobwebs, laden with filth, festooned the place and dimmed the light from the windows.

Boards creaked and sagged beneath my feet as I took a few hesitant steps within. As my eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness I saw a bar that extended halfway along one wall, a few bottles and glasses still upon it, but there was something wrong with the other half of the wall. It seemed to have been pulled out of place. I picked my way carefully through the debris for a closer look and found myself, finally, gazing into what had been a secret room behind a movable wall. Cardboard boxes were stacked high at the rear of the room. Many had rotted and given way, to spill their contents downward like talus from the side of a steep cliff. A litter of liquor bottles, some broken, some still intact, a great store of illegal merchandise that had been kept hidden away by the owner of the nightclub!

After Sheriff Bailey's murderous raid, someone had obviously discovered the cache and had been systematically toting it away, probably in gunnysacks thrown

over shoulders, to a waiting car on the north road, then bootlegging it at fantastic prices. Then, for some reason, the bootlegging had suddenly stopped. By the looks of things, the place hadn't been entered for years on end.

I left the room, began picking my way through the gloom around the end of the bar, and nearly stumbled over the skull that lay directly in my path, grinning up at me. I took a hasty step backward and nearly fell over two mounds of bottles. One mound still had shreds of gunnysacking in evidence. The other was merely a pile of shattered bottles.

I approached the skull again and now saw, on cloth-shrouded ribs, a rusted and tarnished badge—a sheriff's badge—and near a hipbone lay a revolver still sheathed in a leather holster that was now almost completely rodent-eaten.

So this accounted for Sheriff Bailey's sudden disappearance some thirty-five years ago! But what had happened here? Had he come into the place, surprised the

thieves, and been killed before he'd had a chance to pull his gun? I shook my head, wonderingly. I guessed I would never know. Anyway, Lost Creek Castle now had a real ghost, the ghost of Sheriff Bailey.

I had seen enough and was about to turn away when I caught sight of something protruding from the left temple of the skull. I bent over, worked it loose, and carried it to the light of the doorway for a closer look.

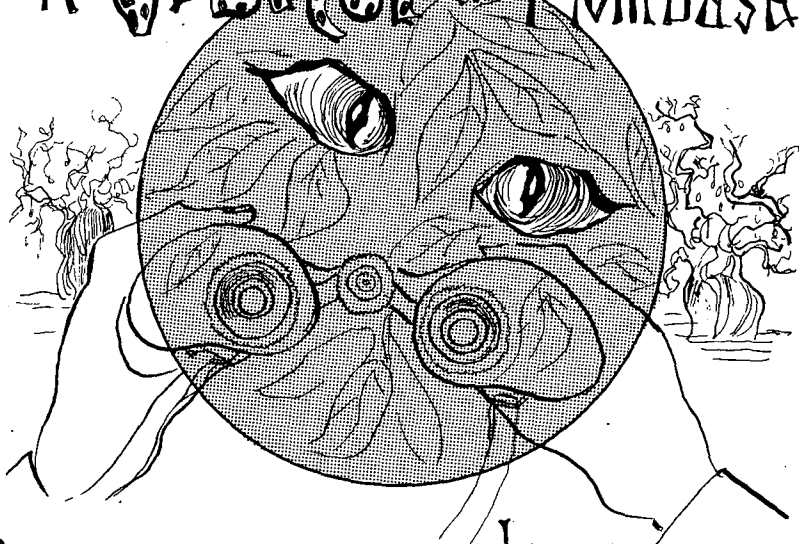
A sudden weakness swept over me and cold sweat broke out upon my forehead as a flood of devastating memories went crashing through my brain: my father's new car during a time of depression, his great friendship with Sheriff Bailey, his lacerated arm and face the morning after Boomer had sent the explosive shell through the window, his sudden decision to move away from Lost Creek for all time . . .

"Oh, no!" I whispered as I let the jagged sliver of corroded copper tubing fall from my trembling fingers. "Oh, no!"



Many a man believes that, given time and opportunity, there is no limit to his accomplishments—in most instances.

A Visitor to Mombasa



Sergeant Harper of the Mombasa Police was daydreaming about Rebecca Conway when his telephone rang. He reached a long arm for the instrument on his desk. "Yes?"

"Constable Jenkins here, sir. Waterfront Detail."

"What is it, Jenkins?"

"I've got a queer one, sir. Probably nothing in it, but I thought I

by
James Holding

ought to report it." Jenkins was new to the job and anxious to play everything safe.

"What is it?" Harper repeated.

"Man named Crosby, sir. Works near the end of the causeway, a night watchman. He claims he saw a leopard sneaking across the causeway into town last night. Or this morning, rather. Just before dawn."

"A leopard!" Harper's voice held surprise.

"Yes, sir." Jenkins waited respectfully for Harper's reaction.

It came promptly. "Fellow was drunk," Harper said.

"I thought of that, sir." Jenkins sounded worried now, but continued. "Crosby admits to a couple of pints on the job during the night. But he swears he saw a leopard. Walking across the causeway from the mainland, bold as brass. He couldn't see the cat's spots, it was too dark, but he says he could see the shape all right for just a moment, and he's sure it was a leopard."

Harper said, "We've had no sighting reports this morning from anyone. Which we surely would have by now, if a leopard's on the loose. Anyway, thanks, Jenkins. I'll look into it." He hung up.

Harper leaned back in his desk chair. He damned the sticky heat of his cramped office and the gullibility of all police recruits. A leopard in Mombasa—he snorted. Tsavo, Nairobi and Amboseli Parks weren't far away, of course,

but no, the hell with it. He went back to picturing the bright Scandinavian beauty of Lieutenant Conway's wife.

Ten minutes later, his telephone rang again. The constable on switchboard duty said, "A lady calling about a leopard, sir. Insists on speaking to someone in authority."

Harper groaned. "Put her on."

The lady, a Mrs. Massingale, reported seeing a creature she was sure was a leopard at daybreak that morning.

"Where?" Harper asked.

"Right here in Mombasa, Sergeant!" Mrs. Massingale said indignantly. "The least we could expect in this Godforsaken city, it seems to me, is protection against wild animals wandering freely about the streets!"

"I meant," explained Harper with exaggerated patience, "just where in Mombasa did you see this leopard?"

"On the old railway line near Mbaraki Creek. Our cottage isn't fifty feet from the line. I happened to look out a rear window this morning at daybreak and there was this black shadow slinking along the ties. I caught its silhouette quite clearly for a moment. It was a leopard."

"Thanks for reporting it, Mrs. Massingale," Harper said. "I'll

look into the matter promptly.”

“See that you do!” She hung up with a muted crash that made Harper grin.

Two reports. So perhaps there was a leopard in Mombasa, unlikely as it seemed. Harper stood up, a tall, solidly-built man with a heavy black moustache and an air of general frustration which he made no attempt to conceal.

The frustration was easily explained, even understandable, in a man of his type. He had come late to police work after a long career as a white hunter in Tanganyika before *uhuru*. Now, after being mildly famous in East Africa, he found himself all at once a lowly sergeant of police, reduced to obeying the orders of Lieutenant Conway, a stuffy man, ten years his junior, who was married, damn his eyes, to the most beautiful woman in Mombasa.

Harper stepped two paces from his desk to the city map taped on his office wall. A leopard reported on the causeway just before dawn—he put a fingertip on the map at the end of the causeway. A leopard reported on the railway line near Mbaraki Creek at daybreak—he touched the spot with another fingertip, and regarded the space between his fingertips narrowly. Yes, he decided, it’s quite possible.

Suddenly he felt a surge of cheerfulness. Dealing with a leopard was work he knew. Still looking at the wall map, he tried consciously to put himself inside the spotted skin and the narrow skull of a leopard, to think as the cat might think, to forecast the movements of the killer he had come to know so well on a hundred safaris.

Suppose, he mused, the leopard was an accidental fugitive from one of the nearby game reserves. The unexpected sight of a long bridge, deserted and comfortably dark, might well have aroused enough feline curiosity in the leopard to make it venture out upon the causeway. Once there, a drift of scent across the water from dockside cattle pens, perhaps, may have drawn it on in quest of meat. Harper could picture vividly the silent cat, padding cautiously across the causeway, nostrils twitching with finicky distaste at the odors of diesel fuel and rotting refuse that vied with the cattle smell over Kilindini Harbor.

Having crossed the bridge, finding no direct route to the cattle scent that drew him, and suddenly surrounded by the strange effluvia of a large city, the leopard would rapidly become confused and frightened, Harper theorized. The

beast's curiosity and hunger would be forgotten in an instinctive urge to find cover quickly in this unfamiliar terrain.

The cat, Harper felt, would therefore turn aside from the wide vulnerable expanse of Makupa Road into the comparative seclusion of the deserted railway line, stepping delicately along the ties through the industrial section of town to Mbaraki Creek, where Mrs. Massingale had caught a fleeting glimpse of him. Thence, it seemed obvious from the map, the leopard might be expected to come out on the bluffs overlooking the sea at Azania Drive, footsore now, apprehension growing as the daylight strengthened, the need for cover reaching panic proportions.

Azania Drive; Harper tried to recall the configuration of the land just there where the railway line bisected the Drive. It was a bleak and lonely stretch of the seaside road, as he remembered it; meandering along the bluffs past an ancient Arab watchtower and bearing little resemblance to the fashionable Azania Drive which also yielded a view of the sea to the Oceanic Hotel, the golf club and scores of comfortable residences beyond. At that place on Azania Drive, above the ferry, a grove of baobab trees stood, de-

fying the sea winds, Harper remembered.

He nodded to himself, utterly intent, thinking with a sense almost of excitement that the thick twisted foliage of those baobab trees just possibly might offer welcome sanctuary to a frightened leopard.

He turned his back to the map. His next step was clear. He should delegate Constable Gordon in the squad room to go at once and check out the baobab trees on Azania Drive for a stray leopard. Gordon would welcome the action, and he was an excellent shot, too, Harper knew. Yet, after the stimulating exercise of mentally plotting the leopard's probable whereabouts in Mombasa, Harper was reluctant to turn the hunt over to somebody else before he, himself, had even sighted the game. He needn't be in at the kill, he told himself. On safari, he had always turned the final shot over to his clients—he was used to that—but he *did* want to mark down the target with certainty before yielding the kill to another. Aside from his thus far unsuccessful campaign to make Rebecca Conway unfaithful to her pompous husband, this city leopard hunt was the most exciting thing that had happened to Harper since he joined the police force.

Yielding to temptation, he reached for his hat, took field glasses from the shelf under his wall map, and strode into the squad room. "Back in a few minutes, Gordon," he told the constable in passing. "Take over until Lieutenant Conway gets in, will you?" Conway never showed for duty until nine o'clock. Yet who could blame him, Harper thought enviously, with the voluptuous Rebecca to keep him at home until the last moment?

He felt the sweat start the moment he stepped out of headquarters into the compound. He climbed into one of the two police cars parked there, a Land-rover. As he turned out of the police compound and headed for Azania Drive, the sun had already warmed the driver's seat so that the cushions burned him, even through his trousers.

A hundred and fifty yards short of the baobab trees on Azania Drive, he stopped the Landrover, parked it beside the road and walked slowly toward the trees. The field glasses hung on their strap about his neck. It was still only a little after eight. Traffic was very light on Azania Drive.

He waited until the road was empty both ways before he stepped from it onto the springy turf that ran like a shaggy carpet

along the landward side of the road, solidly covering the acre of ground under the baobab grove. He walked carefully to within thirty yards of the trees, then stopped and brought the glasses up to his eyes and examined carefully the twisted branches and tangled foliage of the baobabs. He saw nothing that looked even remotely like a leopard.

After five minutes, he moved across the road, still well clear of the trees, and walked another fifty yards to a position from which he could comb the grove from a different angle. He swept the glasses slowly from tree to tree, conscious of growing disappointment as they failed to find what he sought.

The glasses were trained on the last of the trees—a gnarled giant closer to the road than its neighbors—when suddenly, with the sense of electrical shock that accompanies an unexpected explosion, he found himself gazing through the magnifying lenses at two merciless yellow eyes which seemed disembodied in the tree's sun-dappled shade.

He breathed an exclamation that was part admiration for the magnificent cat, whose savage stare transfixed him, part satisfaction at his own astuteness in locating the beast.

Carefully he marked the tree

and the cat's position in it. Then he withdrew to his Landrover and drove away, whistling softly to himself and thinking he should have brought a rifle with him when he left headquarters. Still, he hadn't really expected there was a chance in ten that he'd find the leopard in the grove of baobab trees, he justified himself.

All the same, the cat was there!

Harper felt like celebrating, all at once, his frustrations temporarily forgotten. He had brought off a surprising feat, really: tracking a wild leopard . . . mentally . . . through several miles of sprawling city to a specific lair. His mood was one of exhilaration.

This is what I am good at, he reflected, this is what I was meant to do—not piddling along at a stinking little police job in a dirty city; but working with wild animals, somehow, somewhere, in free, open country, tracking them down and killing them, or working to preserve them from extinction, no matter which, so long as the job was useful and, yes, dangerous. He'd made a horrible mistake when he gave up hunting animals for hunting men. If he could only convince Rebecca Conway to go with him, he'd leave Mombasa tomorrow for Nairobi, Uganda, Australia, India, Alaska—anywhere away from the im-

perious beck and call of Rebecca's impossible, intolerable husband.

He'd asked her a dozen times to leave the fool she was married to and join him in a new free life somewhere else; but Rebecca only smiled at his pleading, kissed him lightly on the cheek like a sister, called him an aging Lothario (at forty-one!) and quoted Shakespeare at him about preferring to bear those ills she had than fly to others that she knew not of. She was flattered by his passion for her, of course, yet she was too fond of her idle, easy life in Mombasa as Conway's wife to risk it lightly.

Harper decided to drive back to headquarters by way of the center of town. That would give him a little extra time to savor his success with the leopard; to anticipate the soon-to-come thrill of squeezing off the perfectly-aimed shot that would rid Mombasa of its dangerous visitor in the baobab tree. Fifteen minutes delay in finishing off the leopard would make no difference to anyone, so far as he could see. The leopard was treed well off the road. It was still frightened, edgy, and hungrier than ever, no doubt, yet posed no threat, Harper knew, to passersby on Azania Drive unless someone approached its tree.

His memory played back to him

one of the warnings he had always issued to hunters on safari: remember that a treed leopard, if hungry, frightened or wounded, will usually attack anything that moves beneath it. So why would anyone approach that baobab tree? Harper was the only person in the city who could possibly have any interest in it.

The high crenelated battlements of Fort Jesus loomed on his left above the crimson blossoms of a flame tree as he passed the Mombasa Club. In the center of the turnabout, the bust of King George caught the morning sunlight and seemed to wink at Harper as he toiled the Landrover around the circle and into Prince Arthur Street.

At police headquarters, he remembered to park his car in the compound off the street, even though he intended to use the Landrover again at once, as soon as he secured a rifle from the gun case in his office. That was one of Lieutenant Conway's silly rules, if you like: that the curb before headquarters must be kept clear and free at all times, so that if the wooden building ever caught fire, there would be ample space for the fire-fighting apparatus to park there!

Thinking of Lieutenant Conway and, inevitably, of Rebecca, Har-

per's leopard-inspired high spirits drained rapidly away. The exhilaration of ten minutes ago had turned to creeping depression by the time he reached his office; the elation of winning a guessing game with a leopard lost its edge. If Rebecca refused him one more time, he swore to himself, he'd throw up this bloody job, anyway, and go off without her.

He unlocked his gun cabinet and took down one of his old rifles, unused since his last safari five years ago. As a special favor, Lieutenant Conway had allowed him to keep this personal weapon as an addition to the headquarters' arsenal. Harper was glad of it, now.

He put ammunition into his pocket, relocked the gun cabinet, and was turning for the door when his telephone rang. Impatiently he paused by his desk, scooped up the receiver and said, "Yes?"

"Some fellow wants the lieutenant," the switchboard man said.

"Then give him the lieutenant," snapped Harper. "I'm busy."

"Lieutenant's not in yet, sir." The constable was apologetic.

Harper glanced at his watch. It was not yet nine o'clock. "Who's calling the lieutenant?"

"He won't say, sir. Says it's confidential and urgent. Native, I

believe, and he speaks Swahili."

"Put him on."

The caller's voice was male, low-pitched, sounded very young. "Who is this?" it asked.

Harper said, "Sergeant Harper. Lieutenant Conway is not here. What do you want?"

"The reward, sir," the young voice whispered. "The reward offered by your lieutenant."

"What reward?"

"For arrow poison, sir. For the names of Wakamba doctors who make arrow poison against the new law."

"Oh." Harper remembered that Conway had been trying for six months to discover which of the Wakamba witch doctors were still manufacturing arrow poison, and thus contributing to massive native slaughter of the game in the reserves. The arrow poison of the Wakamba was made from tree sap; it smelled like licorice; it left a black discoloration in the wound; and it was capable of killing a bull elephant in fifteen minutes.

Harper said, "Have you earned the reward?"

"Yes, sir. I have two names for Lieutenant Conway."

"Who are they? I'll tell the lieutenant."

"No names," the young Wakamba murmured, "until the re-

ward is given. Not until then."

Harper grinned. "Don't trust us, is that it?"

The boy was silent.

"We'll give you the reward first, in that case. All right? What's *your* name?"

"I have no name," said the young voice very formally. "I am risking death to give the lieutenant this information, sir. My own people will kill me if they learn of it."

Harper tried it another way. "Where are you calling from?"

"The Golden Key."

Harper knew the Golden Key, a disreputable bar immediately across the Nyalla Bridge. Used to be called the Phantom Inn because natives would dress up in sheets and act the ghost to startle customers. "You a houseboy there?" he asked.

"No, sir."

Harper hefted his rifle, impatient to go after his leopard. "How can we arrange to give you the reward if you won't tell us who you are?"

"Very simple, sir. I will meet the lieutenant in private. He brings me the reward. I give him the names of the poison-makers."

Harper considered for a moment. "Where do you want the lieutenant to meet you?"

"Where no Wakamba can see

me talking to a policeman." Simple and clear.

"When?" asked Harper.

"Today, sir, please. This morning, if possible. I need the reward very badly, sir. Otherwise, of course . . ." His voice, touched with desperation now, trailed off.

"All right, then," Harper said. "I'll meet you and bring the reward, since the lieutenant isn't here just yet. How much were you promised?"

"Ten pounds, sir." Eagerness now. "That will be good. Where shall I meet you?"

The Wakamba boy's simple question seemed to echo and reecho in a strange pervasive way inside Harper's head, and the idea that was born in his mind at that instant seemed to make his heart shift position in his chest. He sank into his desk chair, clutching the rifle on the desk before him with one hand.

He took a deep breath and said, "You know the old Arab watch-tower, boy? Below Azania Drive near the ferry?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll meet you there in an hour. Or Lieutenant Conway will, if he comes here soon enough. You can make it in an hour, can't you?"

"Yes. But remember, please, I dare not be seen, sir. Azania Drive is very public. Is there no

more private place we can meet?"

"That's private enough," Harper was brusque. "Don't use Azania Drive to get there, come up the shore line on the beach under the bluffs. No one will see you. No one ever goes there, to the tower."

"Very well," said the soft boyish voice. "I'll be there, sir. One hour."

"Good," Harper said. His hand was sweating on the rifle stock. After he hung up, he dried his palms on the jacket of his uniform. He glanced again at his watch: nine-ten. Conway was later than usual today.

He rose and put the rifle back in the wall cabinet. Then, pretending to be busy over a stack of reports, he sat quietly at his desk until he heard Lieutenant Conway's fussy voice in the squad room, greeting Constable Gordon as he passed through to his office.

Harper waited a moment or so before walking into Conway's room.

"Morning, Sergeant," Conway said briskly. "Something on your mind?"

Harper told him about the telephone call from the young Wakamba informer who wouldn't give his name. "Now you're here, sir," he finished matter-of-factly, "I expect you'll want to meet the

boy and get his information yourself, since it's your pigeon, so to speak."

"Of course." Conway rubbed his hands together in a gesture of satisfaction that Harper found extremely irritating. He was exultant, his high voice almost a crow of pleasure as he went on; "So the clever lad, whoever he is, has a couple of witch doctors' names for me, does he? Quite a feather in our cap, Sergeant, if we can clear up this arrow-poison business at last, eh? Where am I supposed to meet him?"

Harper said quietly, "At the Arab watchtower below Azania Drive. It's private enough to quiet the boy's fears of being seen, I thought, yet within easy reach for us. You know it, of course?"

"Certainly I know it. An admirable choice, Sergeant. There and back in fifteen minutes without unduly wasting the taxpayers' time, eh? There's an old track down the bluff to the tower's base as I remember it."

"Right, sir. You can park by the grove of baobab trees on Azania Drive and go straight through under the trees to the cliff edge, where the track goes down."

"I must remember to take the boy's money. What time did you tell him you'd be there?"

"As soon as I could. He seemed

anxious to get it over with. He's been at considerable risk, he claims."

"I'll leave at once." Lieutenant Conway stood up. "Take charge here, Sergeant." He strutted from the room, calling loudly to the cashier outside to give him ten pounds at once.

That was at nine-twenty. At ten-fifteen the call came.

"A motorist on Azania Drive just called in, sir," the switch-board man said. "Says he saw a fellow lying under a tree up there, covered with blood, as he was driving past. Stopped to see if he could help. Got to within fifty feet of the man under the tree and saw he was dead, so he called us."

"Dead!" Harper kept his voice level. "How could he tell from fifty feet away?"

"No face left, sir," the switch-board man said, as though he were reporting a shortage of beer in the commissary icebox. "Bundle of bloody flesh and shredded clothes, the motorist says. As though the fellow'd been mauled by a leopard, maybe." The constable cleared his throat. "Any chance, sir, it could have been the leopard the lady reported earlier?"

"Possible," Harper said. "Where'd he telephone from?"

"The nearest house. He'll stand by until one of our chaps gets there, he says."

"Fine. Hope he has enough sense to keep people out from under that tree where the dead man is. Where is it on Azania Drive?"

"Near the old Arab watchtower. There's a grove of baobab trees just there . . ."

"Right," Harper said. "I'm on my way. Better take a rifle, I guess. Give any calls for me to Constable Gordon."

Surprisingly, when he reached the baobab grove and drew up behind Conway's parked car, there was no one in view nearby save for the motorist, a man named Stacy, who had telephoned headquarters. Greeting Harper's arrival with obvious relief, he said he'd managed to send curiosity seekers—only a handful so far—quickly about their business by telling them there was a wild leopard loose in the grove.

"Good work," grunted Harper, stepping from his car. As though drawn by magnets, his eyes went to the ghastly figure lying asprawl under the nearest tree. Then, in a voice that sounded shocked even to him, he said, "From the looks of that poor chap under the tree, I'd say you were right about the leopard, Mr. Stacy."

Stacy swallowed hard. "I was

sick in the ditch when I saw it," he said. "Then I ran like hell and called you."

Harper nodded and reached into the back of the Landrover for the rifle. "So let's see what we can do about it," he said. "Get across the road, away from the trees, will you, Mr. Stacy, and handle anybody else who may stop to gawk?"

Stacy was more than glad to withdraw across the road.

Harper knew where his target was. For Stacy's benefit however, he was forced to carry on a pretended search of the baobab tree. He moved to various vantage points, left and right of the tree, the rifle held ready. At length, he suddenly raised a hand to Stacy and nodded vigorously, as though he had at last located the cat.

As indeed he had. Even without the field glasses, he had no trouble zeroing in on those blazing eyes turned unblinkingly toward him; and even without the field glasses, he could see quite plainly the streaks and spatters of blood on the savage muzzle. Lieutenant Conway's blood, he told himself with grim satisfaction.

He brought up the gun, steadied his sights on the small target and squeezed off his shot.

Instantly a squalling cyclone of spotted hide and sheathed claws

fell out of the tree, crashing through the baobab foliage. At the crack of the shot, a widow bird rose from the top of a neighboring tree and flapped slowly away, trailing its long black feathers. Harper wondered if that were a sign. When the leopard struck the ground, only a few feet from its mangled victim, it was quite dead.

"You got him!" yelled Stacy from across the road, his voice thin from excitement. "Bravo!"

Harper didn't take his eyes off the leopard, holding the gun ready for a second shot, although he was quite sure the first had done its work thoroughly. He was remembering another of his white-hunter maxims: never approach downed game until you are certain it is dead.

At length he was satisfied. He motioned to Stacy to stay where he was, and stepping carefully on the rough turf, made his way to the baobab tree and the still figures under it. A glance showed him the leopard was quite dead; a head shot of which he could be proud.

He turned, then, toward Lieutenant Conway's corpse, his brain suddenly busy with a variety of thoughts. He must not forget to give the Wakamba boy at the watchtower his reward and settle the arrow-poison business, now that Conway was gone. He must inform Rebecca Conway of her husband's tragic end and console her as best he could. Would he be promoted now to lieutenant, and thus be able to offer Rebecca a continuation of the privileged life she seemed to find so enchanting in Mombasa? Given time, he was sure he could persuade her to marry him—and now, he thought, smiling a little, he had lots of time.

He was wrong. He didn't even have time to raise his eyes to the tree branch above him, or to bring up the rifle, still held loosely in his hand. In the last split-second of his life, before pitiless teeth and talons tore his throat out, Harper had time for but a single flash of realization: there had been a *pair* of leopards visiting Mombasa!



A seemingly insoluble problem occasionally bows to a very ingenious deduction.



After passing Sedlow's motion to adjourn the monthly meeting of our Gimlet Club, we separated into small, informal groups for sociable intercourse. It was Holcombe who observed that our subject for the evening, *Poe's Tales of Detection*, had been handled ad-

mirably. "Always was a *Gold Bug* fan," he said. "Something about the cipher. Whets the curiosity, don't you think?"

"Quite so," Morely said. "Nothing like a seemingly insoluble problem to bring out the detective in every man."

"Puts me in mind of Sherlock Holmes," Sedlow said. "There was a keen fellow for you."

"The keenest, I should think," Holcombe agreed. "Would've made short work of that *Gold Bug* thing."

For a moment we fell silent, as though we sensed the gaunt figure of Holmes in peaked cap and plaid cape were in the room with us; but the quiet did not last, for suddenly there came from the direction of the fireplace an unmistakable snort, followed by a gruff, "Bosh! Silliest bit of nonsense I've heard tonight!"

Our eyes fell upon the figure

by
W.S. Doxey

seated in the red leather chair close by the blazing fire. It was our oldest member, the ancient Winslow.

"Eh?" queried Sedlow. "You don't agree about Holmes?"

"'Tis no question of agreeing or not," Winslow replied, pulling a plaid blanket closer about his legs. "What's at stake here is truth, plain and simple."

Sedlow bristled at this. "Of which you, I take it, have cornered the market?"

Winslow looked up with a fearsome gaze that was answer in itself, but he didn't end the matter there. "Sir, since you question my veracity, I warn you, though old, I can be fierce when angered by a fool!" His jowls shook and Sedlow retreated a pace.

I attempted to make peace between the two, saying, "Now, now, Winslow, Sedlow meant no personal affront. The great Sherlock Holmes is his favorite, that's all. One does not wish his hero's reputation sullied."

"Hear, hear!" Morely cried.

At my words Winslow's shaggy gray brows lifted somewhat and the clear blue of his eyes was visible, much like pure sky after storm clouds drift away. His voice took on a more moderate tone as he said, "Now we are grappling with the real issue. Mr. Sedlow is

to be supported for protecting his hero. Won't you lads accord me the same right?"

"Your hero? But who is he?" Morely asked.

"Were you acquainted with my full and complete name you might then deduce him."

"But as membership secretary I *know* your name. Yet for the life of me I cannot—unless—" Morely stopped in midsentence. His mouth fell open. In a tone not untouched by incredulity, he said, "You cannot suggest that—"

"Aye, but I do!" Winslow said. "My name, from beginning to end, is Robert Clyde Latham Watson Winslow. Aye, *Watson!*" He slapped his knee and gave a great, chest-heaving laugh. "Now do you see my point?"

"The same Watson as—"

"The very same, indeed—exactly the same. Dr. Watson was my own mother's uncle, and 'tis for him alone I proudly bear the name."

There was a tremor in Sedlow's voice. "Is—is it possible that—I mean, *could* you have actually *known* Sherlock Holmes?"

"That dubious pleasure was mine. He and my great-uncle Watson paid us a brief visit. I was a lad then, and more fascinated by candy than crime. Uncle Wats, as I called him, brought me a bag of

excellent peppermints. As it happened, they were at that time dealing with the Baskerville thing which received so much notice."

"*The Hound of the Baskervilles!*" Sedlow cried. "It's my favorite case!"

Holcombe said, "And a fine one, true. But those concerned with Professor Moriarty are more to my liking."

I believe Sedlow and Holcombe would've debated this issue had not Winslow silenced all with an upraised palm and said, "'Tis obvious you fellows are experts when it comes to the adventures of Mr. Holmes. But did you know there is one case—a very curious one, indeed—which was for certain reasons never made public?"

"I beg your pardon?" Sedlow questioned.

Holcombe shook his head so emphatically his bow tie assumed a precarious slant. "Quite impossible, utterly out of the question! Chap named Conan Doyle got all the cases together in a neat package. Everyone knows that."

Storm clouds came into Winslow's face again. "Sir, everyone *knows* that which those in the *real* know choose to allow them to know!"

Now Morely leaped in: "Are you implying that the history of Sherlock Holmes—the great one

himself—has been tampered with?"

"Sir, I do not imply!"

"Preposterous!" Sedlow cried.

"I won't hear of it!" exclaimed Holcombe.

Winslow's huge roaring laugh broke like thunder, and he said, "Aye, that's the attitude! I know it well. 'Tis fools like you, great puffed-up noddies, who mortally wounded the reputation of my Uncle Watson and announced him to the wide world as nothing more than Holmes' lackey!"

He threw the blanket to the floor, struggled to his feet, and shouted for Crenshaw, the butler, to summon his car.

"But, Winslow, you cannot mean to leave us like this," I expostulated. "Do you forget the name of our group? This is the Gimlet Club; our purpose is to bore into the center of things, to strike at the heart. We must know about this strange case you mention."

"Bah, the fools are too set in their erroneous ways!" he growled. "Leave 'em there in the muck of the ignorant."

"No man calls me ignorant!" Holcombe protested.

"I call you what you are!"

I stepped between the two, took Winslow by the arm, helped him back into the chair. Having

motioned Crenshaw to disregard his previous instructions, I fixed the blanket about him once more and said, "Fellow club members, have we forgotten how many years we have met in this same room? Have we lost track of our many shared moments of adventure? Can it be that we do not now remember that we are gentlemen as well as old friends?"

I fixed my gaze first upon Sedlow and Holcombe, then upon Winslow, as I spoke. One by one they bowed their heads as though the weight of my words had touched them.

"That's better, much better," I said. "Crenshaw, some brandy, please."

We raised our glasses. The warmth of the liquor and the cozy fire melted my companions' icy reserve. At last, Holcombe said, "Winslow, sorry."

"Terrible misunderstanding," Sedlow mumbled.

Winslow nodded and muttered a phrase which we acknowledged as sufficient to clear all evil vapors from the air.

Then I said, quite matter-of-factly, "Now let us hear more about Winslow's distinguished ancestor. I believe you mentioned a certain famous case which was never publicized? Will you tell us how this came to be so?"

"I will," he said, "for another tot of brandy."

As Crenshaw refilled our glasses, we brought chairs and arranged them before the fire.

"Now, then," Winslow said, looking into the flames, "you must understand there's been a natural reluctance in my mother's family to call attention to Uncle Watson, seeing as how he's been portrayed as a sort of bumbling straight-man for Mr. Holmes. I'm not one to place the blame on Mr. Conan Doyle, for the truth is that Uncle Wats was a quiet man who felt no great desire for the limelight. Rather, he was content to remain in the background and give Mr. Holmes all the credit. Once he explained it to my mother by saying, 'Sherlock's really a frustrated actor at heart. For his continued good health he requires frequent dosages—heavy dosages, mind you—of applause.'

"As you all know, my uncle was a medical doctor. He went out to the east as a young man and so did not meet Sherlock Holmes till middle-age. By then his life was well formed and, while by no means a creature of habit, he was nevertheless set in his ways. Mr. Doyle captures several of his mannerisms—he did have a fine sense of the humorous—but in the flesh he was much more than a sound-

ing board for Holmes, you know."

Sedlow said, "You were speaking of a certain case?"

"All in good time," Winslow replied. "First, I must lay all my cards out plainly upon the table, so you'll know what I tell you is not in the least motivated by malice. I am the first to admit Sherlock Holmes' deductive genius. His power of logic was so huge that, yes, even I have admired him."

Winslow paused, nodded at the smiling Holcombe and Sedlow. Then, the smile fading into an expression of thoughtfulness, "But I did not close my eyes to the possibility that Holmes might at least once fail. To rephrase a school-book proposition: All men are fallible; Holmes was a man; ergo . . . Do you see?"

"Clearly," I said, "and do you not also imply a second proposition? To wit: All men sometimes succeed; Watson was a man; ergo . . ."

"That's it, that's it exactly! There was a time when these two logical statements came together, and *Watson solved a case which Holmes could not.*"

Sedlow and Holcombe groaned. Morely made an uncomfortable cough. Crenshaw was before the fireplace stirring the coals. Perhaps it was only the play of flame

across his usually impassive features, but I thought he smiled. As a servant always attending to others; I reasoned he might well have sufficient cause to be delighted by Winslow's story.

"To be sure," Winslow continued, "this extraordinary case concerned not one crime but rather several, a series of robberies from private domiciles owned by persons completely unknown to one another."

"Oh," Sedlow interposed, "might we, then, not deduce that the common factor uniting them was that they had nothing in common."

"Brilliant!" Winslow agreed. "That is the very same conclusion your Sherlock Holmes reached when first apprised of the facts."

"But surely there is more?" I asked.

Winslow raised his eyebrow by way of saying yes. "The gentleman who brought the case to Sherlock Holmes was the latest victim. Scotland Yard had admitted to him that its detectives were puzzled to the state of confusion. Holmes received the bit of information with an icy smile, invited the chap to take a cup of pekoe, and proceeded to inquire what, exactly, had been stolen.

"Seems the fellow came prepared to deal with Mr. Holmes.

From his coat pocket he withdrew a very neatly drawn up list of valuables. After he made his exit, Holmes and my uncle Watson compared this accounting with those submitted, at Holmes' request, by the other victims."

"Ah, ha!" Holcombe said. "There was a common article which all had lost, was there not?"

"As a matter of fact there was."

Morely said, "Jolly good work, Holcombe!"

"Quite elementary, really," Holcombe replied.

Winslow continued: "The common object was, simply, currency, which anyone would guess a thief would be tempted to make off with."

Holcombe frowned.

"In addition, there were a number of small objects of jewelry—ropes of pearls, diamond pins, rings—the usual costly items with which persons of the upper class are wont to adorn their women-folk, small objects which a thief might easily conceal, objects which require no great physical strength to carry away."

Sedlow asked, "Are you implying that Holmes was able to construct a profile of the thief by evaluating the items stolen?"

"Mr. Holmes' mind did operate in that manner, although the re-

sults were inconclusive. For, if you stop to think about it, the size of the items really meant nothing. A small man or a large man might take them away, not to mention a woman, a child, or even a trained animal."

"Another dead end," I said.

"For the moment, yes. But then another bit of evidence turned up."

"Fingerprints?" asked Sedlow.

"Unfortunately, no. A note."

Winslow paused and permitted Crenshaw to refill his glass. In this moment Holcombe cast a bewildered look at Morely, who promptly relayed it to Sedlow.

"Are we to assume," Sedlow asked, "that this *note* was crucial to Holmes' solution of the crime?"

"You may assume that, or whatsoever you wish," Winslow replied. "However, Sherlock did not solve the case. As for the note, well, there was more than one."

"A note for each crime?"

"Yes. Each was hidden in a place in which only a trained detective would look."

Holcombe laughed nervously. "Afraid you've confused me now. Does this mean the criminal did or did not intend the notes to be found?"

Before Winslow could answer, Sedlow gave his opinion: "Quite obviously the thief wished the

notes to be found. Had he not cared one way or the other, he would've put them in a conspicuous spot. By carefully hiding them, he insured they would not be inadvertently lost by some careless act—a breeze, for example, or a daydreaming servant.”

“That’s quite perceptive,” Winslow said. “No doubt you’ll be gratified to know that your Sherlock Holmes arrived at the same conclusion.”

Sedlow’s smile swelled across his face. “That being so,” said he, “allow me to reveal why the notes were left.”

“By all means.”

“There can be only one reason: the criminal wished to challenge the greatest detective of the age!”

Morely said, “By Jove, I’m half-inclined to agree with Sedlow!”

“Then you would be correct,” Winslow said. “However, the question now to be answered is *why* any criminal would dare cross swords with Sherlock Holmes.”

Sedlow’s assured expression changed to a puzzled frown. He announced his bewilderment with a plainly audible, “Hmm.”

“Perhaps,” I said, “the contents of the notes might shed some light?”

“Good thinking,” Winslow commented, “especially when you

consider each note bore the same message.”

“What? The notes were identical?” queried Morely.

“They were. Now I will tell you the gist of what they said. It was a little story: Once upon a time, a boy and his father were traveling upon a train, when suddenly, without warning, there was a derailment. The accident killed the father outright, and the lad was seriously injured. A rescue squad cut him from the twisted steel and rushed him to a small nearby hospital, where the local physician determined he must be sent to a distant facility for tedious surgery, else he should die. As it so happened, the larger hospital was in the city from which the boy and his late father had come. He was taken into the operating room. All was ready for the procedure that would save his life. However, the surgeon, upon entering, took one look at the lad and said, ‘I cannot operate upon my own son,’ and left.”

Winslow stopped and drank down the rest of his brandy.

“And—the boy passed away?” Holcombe asked.

“I cannot say. That’s all there was to the message.”

Morely said, “But what does it mean, and how does it solve the case?”

"Yes, how?" Sedlow asked. "What did Holmes do with this information?"

"I've told you; Holmes ultimately could do nothing. The solution to this case was beyond his powers."

"But I don't understand. What is the connection between the notes and the crimes?"

Winslow folded his blanket neatly and rose from the chair. "That is for you who are disciples of the Great Sherlock Holmes to deduce. At our next meeting I will hear your solutions. Crenshaw, have my car brought around."

After Winslow took his leave, Sedlow, Holcombe and Morely puzzled over the facts of the matter but came to no reasonable conclusion.

"What I do not comprehend," Morely said, "is how the boy's father, who dies in the train crash, can be alive and refuse to operate upon him."

Sedlow nodded. "You have a good point. Frankly, I am baffled by the idea of the note itself. Why would a criminal tempt Sherlock Holmes? There can be no reason, unless he wished to be apprehended, and certainly no criminal would desire that fate."

Holcombe scowled. "I do not believe there is a solution! I am of

the opinion that Winslow told us a yarn because we think so highly of Sherlock Holmes!"

I wish I might report that Winslow gave us the key to the mystery at our next meeting of the Gimlet Club. However, this was not the case, for he was taken quite ill, and could not attend. When the following meeting day came around he had left the country to winter, as was his custom, on the Continent.

It so happened that a fortnight later I decided on the spur of the moment to seek several days of sunshine myself. I proceeded to the south of France, to the delightful little town of Juan-les-pins on the Riviera near Cannes. I took rooms at the Hotel Belles Rives on the Boulevard du Littoral and, having freshened a bit from the long trip and donned more comfortable togs, went down to the patio for a drink.

As I stepped into the bar what should I hear but, "Sir William, is it you?"

At the sound of my name I spun about and saw Winslow sitting upon the sunny terrace. "Bring your drink. Join me," he said.

We took turns commenting upon the strange coincidence which caused our paths to cross.

Then, his blue eyes giving a great twinkle, Winslow cocked his head to one side and said, "Tell me, have the precocious children of Sherlock Holmes solved the little mystery I left in their keeping?"

At this query I smiled and replied, "They have not. In fact, they have decided there was no mystery." I leaned a bit closer. "They are convinced you deceived them."

His laugh caused heads to turn at the bar. "I deceive those worthies? No, 'tis a real and honest mystery." Now it was his turn to lean toward me. "Of course, I would not care for them ever to know the real truth."

"Perhaps I know," I said.

"You, Sir William? How so?"

"Are you willing to listen to my deductions and to say if they are true or false?"

"Aye." He nodded, took a sip from his glass, said, "But only upon the condition you make solemn oath that should you solve the case, you will never tell the others."

I agreed, and then began to relate my solution to the mystery.

"In the first place, the criminal did not commit the thefts for gain. Rather, he stole in order to call attention to the notes which he so carefully hid."

"You are doing very well,"

Winslow said, nodding his head.

"He chose his victims at random so as to establish no pattern. Thus, he baffled Scotland Yard and assured that Holmes would be called in."

Winslow nodded.

"His reason for challenging Holmes was not to defeat him, but rather to be defeated by him—*for the criminal desired above all else to be caught.*"

Winslow expressed his cloudiest frown.

"However," I continued, "he did not wish to be apprehended by the public police, for he wanted to avoid notoriety. From this I deduce that the criminal, whoever he was, was extremely ill with an emotional problem. He desired to be treated, but for some reason was unable to be."

"Sir William, I congratulate you. Thus far, you are absolutely correct. But what about the notes?"

"Ah yes, the notes. The message, I believe, was more than a little story. I think it was a riddle which was intended to identify the criminal. Furthermore, I am convinced that Holmes could not solve the riddle, that your Uncle Watson did, and, consequently, solved the case."

"And can you solve the riddle?"

"I have a solution which seems

logical to me. I hope you agree."

"I am listening."

"The boy's father was killed, yet the surgeon could not operate upon the boy because of a parental relationship. If the father was dead, and if there is no stepfather, then the surgeon who called the boy 'son' could be only one other person."

"Yes?"

"The boy's mother."

Winslow laughed gently, in a self-satisfied way, so that one might suppose he perceived a very pleasant joke. He said, "My Uncle Watson was quite amused by the way Holmes took the message literally. He searched the newspapers, went back years in fact, looking for train accidents close by small hospitals. He checked list after list of the injured."

"To no avail?"

"Oh, a few possibilities came to light, but they proved valueless."

"But your uncle knew that the surgeon in the message was a woman?"

"Yes, and at last, after Holmes came near to a mental breakdown, Uncle Wats handed him the *Registry of Surgeons* opened to a certain page where a name was circled in red. There were

few female surgeons in those days. This particular lady was a widow. Her son, a lad of sixteen, suffered from kleptomania. Poor fellow, he feared that should he tell his mother, she would be crushed by learning he was a compulsive thief. As it turned out, however, all was handled judiciously. The victims were satisfied by restitution of their property, and since Holmes was a private detective, no formal police report was made. The boy spent ten months undergoing treatment in Vienna. He later became a prominent barrister."

I signaled the bartender for fresh drinks. For a short time Winslow and I sat quietly in the splendid sunshine savoring that keen delight which comes with the working out of strenuous mental exercises.

At last, I broke the silence by proposing a toast. Raising the cool glass to my lips, I said, "Let us drink this one for Doctor Watson, the unsung hero of who knows how many other cases credited to Sherlock Holmes."

Winslow beamed his approval and said, "I shall always be happy to do justice to a drink in the name of my great uncle."

So we did justice together.

One's reason for becoming involved may not be completely altruistic.



At the time of the holdup there were not more than a dozen or so customers inside the bank, a small branch office with no guard. Lean, white-haired Old Dave, wearing steel-rimmed reading glasses, was endorsing his Social Security check for cashing. His age-speckled hand grasping the chained pen froze on the glass-topped desk as a voice rapped, "Stickup! Everyone down on the floor."

The voice sounded familiar. Turning, Old Dave saw three bandits, slightly out of focus through his lenses. One, holding a gun and a large shopping bag, was vaulting over the little locked gate barring access to the tellers; another, also armed, was racing toward the carpeted, railed-off section where the bank officers sat behind desks; a third, the one who had shouted the command, had stationed himself by the door to the small

foyer, beyond which was the closed street door, and was covering the entire floor with what to Old Dave looked like a .45 automatic. All three wore gray ski masks.

This was the second time since he retired a year ago as gateman for the Sturn Line pier that Old Dave had been caught in a holdup. The first had occurred two months ago, soon after he left this same bank with the cash from a Social Security check in his wallet, and a sign in the window of a cut-rate liquor store caught his eye. Living on a small pension and Social Security, Old Dave had

store owner had any kind of hidden weapon, they gave him no chance to use it. He was a slight man, and one of the husky pair darted behind the counter, slammed him up against the tall rows of bottles, facing them, warning him to stay that way. His companion covered Old Dave and the other customer.

"Wallets!" he snapped, in a croaky kind of voice.

The other customer already had his wallet in his hand, waiting for his change. The bandit snatched it and rammed it into a side pocket of his black leather jacket. His hard eyes switched to Old Dave, who was hesitating with his hand inside his jacket pocket. The bandit jammed the gun against Old Dave's chest.

"Don't try to play it smart, old man," he croaked.

Old Dave brought out the wallet. The bandit grabbed it and pocketed it. Meanwhile, the other holdup man had filled his pockets at the cash register, then slipped from behind the counter, and the pair fled.

The store owner ran out to the street, returning almost at once. "They made off in a car," he panted. "No cops in sight, but I got the license number." He snatched up a telephone.

"They got all my Social Secu-

by
Patrick O'Keefe

been loathe to pass up a chance to buy a couple of fifths of rye whiskey at a bargain.

He entered the store just as the owner had taken payment from the sole customer inside, and was making change at the cash register. Old Dave had no sooner stepped up to the counter than two men wearing masklike wrap-around dark glasses strode in, drawing small revolvers. If the

rity money, a hundred and sixty dollars," lamented Old Dave.

"Tough luck, old-timer," said the other customer. "You sure picked the wrong day to buy your liquor. Me—I was lucky. They only got a ten-spot. I'd just handed over a fifty to pay for my booze, so it's his hard luck," he said, nodding at the store owner.

The store owner slapped down the telephone. "The cops'll be here any minute. They want both of you to stick around."

"I've gotta be on my way," said the other customer. "I can't tell 'em any more than you and this old-timer. You know where they can find me. Make sure you deliver my order in time for the big party." He grinned. "Maybe this one will make you change your mind."

The store owner went to the door with his customer, who was about half Old Dave's age, dark and not quite so lean, looking prosperous enough in a camel's-hair overcoat to be giving fifty-dollar orders. The store owner fastened the door after him and remained waiting beside it.

"This is the third time my store's been held up in four months," he said ruefully.

"Did you ever get your money back?" Old Dave asked.

"Not a nickel." The store owner

grimaced in disgust. "The punks weren't even caught. I don't want to make you feel bad, but don't figure on ever seeing your money again. The cops'll ask you what the stickup men looked like and so forth, and that'll be the end of it. After the last stickup, they took me to look at some mug shots. I didn't recognize any of them, so the cops were stymied."

Old Dave gazed at him in lugubrious silence.

The store owner turned bitter. "This town's a jungle. All a couple of guys have to do is walk into a store or a bank, pull guns, and they're in the money. Take that man who just went out. He's my best customer. He's in a racket of some sort and getting away with it. He's got a swell apartment in the Towers around on the Avenue. He says it's suckers like me who stay in business and keep stickup men in the chips."

He opened the door as a precinct car drove up and two policemen jumped out. They hurried inside, and the owner fastened the door again. To the two policemen it was only another investigation in a series of store holdups that had become as routine as parking violations.

"I was too upset thinking about my money to notice what they

looked like or were wearing," Old Dave told them. "The punk who grabbed my wallet, though, had a kinda funny voice."

"Now, if we had a rogues' gallery of taped voices . . ." sighed the policeman.

"Do you think there's a chance of catching those two guys with the money?" Old Dave asked mournfully. "The store owner got their license number."

"I don't want to raise any false hopes, Pop. The odds are it's a stolen car, but we'll sure do all we can to apprehend them."

That evening, Old Dave had supper ready for Doris when she came in from her accounting-department job with the Sturn Line. After Old Dave's wife died about three years ago, he had stayed on in the midtown apartment with his young unmarried daughter, taking over most of the house-keeping after he retired. He told Doris about the holdup before they sat down to supper.

"I hated to give him my money," growled Old Dave, "but he stuck his gun into me like he meant business."

"Dad," Doris said anxiously, "I'm glad you didn't do anything foolish. The police always say never to resist. Stop worrying about the money."

Old Dave, however, didn't stop

worrying, and the loss of his money came to his mind with the start of the mid-forenoon bank robbery. A fat, middle-aged woman standing beside him looked down at the muddy wetness on the floor, tramped in from the rain, and moaned that her new spring dress would be ruined. She lowered herself gingerly, and Old Dave settled down beside her, putting away his spectacles.

Past the head of a shirt-sleeved young man squatting in front of him, he could now see in focus the man who had announced the stickup, standing watchfully with the automatic. Old Dave felt sure he'd heard his voice before, and tried to remember when and where. The bandit was of modest build, wearing brown coveralls, with a ski mask covering his entire head and neck, his eyes and mouth behind slits. There was nothing about his appearance that stirred Old Dave's memory.

The fat woman whimpered that she was getting a cramp in her left leg. Until she spoke, the inside of the bank had become as silent as a meditation chapel except for muted street-traffic noises, rising in bursts as a truck or a trailer rumbled by. After the first warning shout, it almost seemed as if the robbery were being carried out by mutes.

From his sitting position, Old Dave could still see the card standing on the glass top of the desk. He had inspected it more than once during calls at the bank. It contained head-and-shoulders photographs of several wanted bank robbers, together with an offer of ten thousand dollars by the New York Clearing House Association for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any one of the bandits listed; a reward was offered also for similar information concerning other robberies of any of its member banks. One photograph had been taken inside a bank during a robbery. Old Dave, glancing up at the cameras mounted on the walls, sniffed in disdain. All they'd get would be ski masks.

Old Dave was suddenly excited by the thought that here might be a chance to get a reward big enough to make up for the money stolen in the liquor store, and then some. He stared hard at the bandit by the door, trying to detect something about him that would help him to remember where he'd heard his voice.

The silence continued except for occasional murmurs of discomfort from the customers sitting or lying on the floor. One man had a spell of coughing. Some girl behind the tellers' counter let out

a half-stifled nervous sob. A woman moaned that she was sure to miss her train. The bandit guarding the doorway made no response.

As the seconds passed, Old Dave grew desperate. The holdup couldn't last much longer. It might even get interrupted suddenly by a customer coming in, or a passerby happening to glance through the opening between the tall window curtains and then yelling for the police. He had to do something quickly.

He suddenly leaned aside, placing his hands on the floor, and started to scramble to his feet. Before he had half risen, a swift warning came from the doorway.

"Stay down, old man, or you'll get hurt."

Old Dave dropped back onto his haunches, openmouthed. He knew now where he'd heard that voice before. It was in the liquor-store holdup. He wondered if the bandit had recognized him. Not that it should worry him, with a ski mask hiding his face.

"Do you want him to start shooting?" demanded the fat woman in a fierce whisper.

In the next minute, the bandit with the shopping bag tossed it over the little gate and vaulted after it. His companion covering the bank officers retreated swiftly

toward the foyer. The bandit by the door covered their exit in silence, then turned and ran after them.

A relieved voice called out from the carpeted section, "It's all over, ladies and gentlemen."

In the hubbub that ensued, one of the officers ran out to the street, but returned shaking his head.

Uniformed police in patrol cars and detectives in unmarked cars arrived within minutes. They herded customers away from the tellers' counter and the gate to protect possible fingerprints. Detectives began questioning the customers.

"This old man might have got me shot instead of himself," complained the fat woman to one detective, a hippie-dressed member of the anticrime force. He turned to Old Dave.

"I only made like I wanted to get up, not as though I was pulling a gun or anything," said Old Dave. "I did it to make him say something, so I'd maybe remember where I'd heard his voice be-

fore—sometime other than today."

"And you did?" snapped the detective.

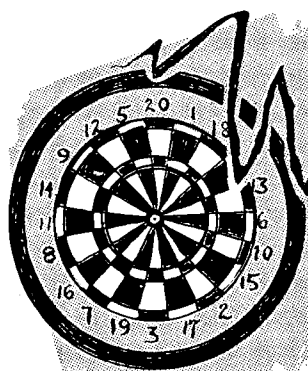
Old Dave nodded. "He runs a liquor store a few blocks from here."

Old Dave told Doris about the bank holdup that evening before supper. "The cops and the bank made a big fuss over me. All the cops had to do was go around to the liquor store and talk to the new owner. They got all three of the robbers in the Towers apartment just as they were splitting up the money. That made the bank feel good, and they told me I'd be getting a pretty big check soon, just for choosing to get involved, they said."

Old Dave paused. "I feel kinda sorry for the guy. He tried to make a go of it in the liquor store. After that last holdup, he must have called it a day and accepted his best customer's offer to take him into his racket, which turned out to be bank robbery. He couldn't lick 'em so he joined 'em, and got nabbed on his first job."



There are strong indications that realization may be equal to anticipation.



Waiting for Harry

Aye sir, there's a bit of room left at this bench. Bring your pint and come sit. I'll just move along a mite to make room for you. There now, that's the ticket. All comfy and cozy.

You'd be a foreigner. American, from the cut of your coat and your manner of speaking. Left the missus at the hotel, I expect, and come to find out what a real London pub looks like. Well, you couldn't have picked a better example than the good old Lord Nelson's Arm. A working man's pub—no catering to the tourist trade. And little Rels there at the tap draws honest measure. Your mug gets filled with ale to the

brim, not half foam such as you'll find in the fancier places with their painted barmaids and cheaty tapmen.

No, sir, I appreciate the offer, but I've never gone after smoking them cigarettes. A pipe's my preference. Gives a man something he can get his teeth into, as it were.

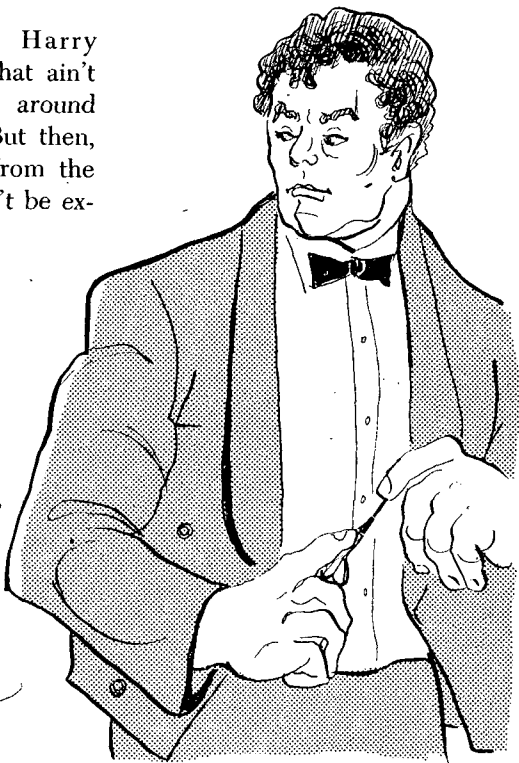
See the dartboard, do you? The two playing are Sandy and Ian. They're my mates down on the wharfs where we earn the money each day that we pay out to Rels during the evenings. But if you don't mind a bit of free advice, I wouldn't get into a game with them if I was you. Oh, they'd allow you to play, right enough.

Might even let you win a bit, just to get your interest up. But later, when the mugs were getting filled more often and the wagers rose to respectable proportions, they'd gain what's in your purse with no more trouble than off-loading a cargo of feathers. Leave the darts to the experts if you wish to walk out of here with more in your pockets than your empty fists. It was darts, after all, that brought Harry McCauley down into the dust, and he was about the best there was at the game.

What's that? Who's Harry McCauley, do you say? That ain't a question a person from around here would have to ask. But then, I keep forgetting you're from the States. I guess you wouldn't be ex-

pected to know. But don't it seem odd to you that with it being mid-week and all, this pub is chock-a-block with men having their pints, while every other one in the city is half empty? It's a grand place to be, of course, but the real reason we all gather here each eve-

*by William
Brittain*



ning is to wait for old Harry. Some of us have been waiting for years.

Tell you what. You fetch us a couple more pints, and I'll tell you the story of how Harry McCauley got his comeuppance at that very dartboard you see at the other end of the bar.

Ah, there's a good man. Just let me take that near tankard from you. Now then, about Harry McCauley. Time was, he used to own the Lord Nelson's Arm, lock, stock, and barrel. He felt it would be a blot on his manhood to be beholden to any man. Had the deed to the place framed and mounted on the wall behind the bar, he did. He used to take pride in the fact that while most of the others in his line of work were mortgaged up to their ears, he owed tuppence to no man.

A big, brawny, grinning, roistering hulk of a man was Harry, with arms and legs like oaken posts and muscles hard and bunchy under his skin like knobs of blackthorn. I myself once had the pleasure of passing Gibraltar at daybreak on a clear day when the ship I served on entered the Mediterranean. The rock is a most awesome thing to behold. But one look at Harry, standing behind the bar like a modern Goliath with fists wrapped around the tap han-

dles, and I had to admit that of the two sights, Harry was the most impressive.

Harry used to say that he'd been born knowing how to win at darts, and after trying him a few times, all of us regular patrons were willing to agree. The pub was his way of making a living, but darts was his life, if you know what I mean. The minute he'd bought the Lord Nelson's Arm, he had the dartboard put in. The best one he could find. Made of pressed hog bristle, it is, not rolls of paper like the toys fathers take home to their children. Must have cost him twelve quid, at least. And the darts he had came in special cases, like fine jewelry. Wooden flights with specially cut feathering, points of the finest steel—in their cases they looked like sets of matched dueling pistols.

As I said, we all took on Harry at the darts, not once, but several times. He'd give us any odds we named—a shilling to a guinea, if that was the only way he could find a game. Then he'd ease back a bit for the first few rounds, just to make it interesting. But when it came to the final few numbers, there'd be Harry, throwing like he was trying to split a gnat's eyelash, and whoever he was playing against would find himself down

ten or twelve points at the end and paying out whatever he'd lost on the bet.

Trouble with Harry was, he couldn't ever bring himself to lose. All the time it was win, win, win—bless me if I ain't beginning to sound like Kipling. At any rate, we finally got a bit tired of going home with all the coins and maybe a few bills gone from our pockets, and we refused to play against him if there was money on the game. It was a sad day for Harry when he found he couldn't scare up a bet on the darts, even at the wildest odds. When business was slow he'd just stand by the board, holding a dart between his fingers with a surgeon's sure touch, but with a faraway look in his eye, like he was remembering the good days when the money rustled and jingled as it fell into his palm.

For a while he'd get challenges from strangers who hadn't heard of him. A bet would be made, and at the end Harry would pocket the wager. But finally his reputation got about, and nobody'd touch the darts while Harry McCauley was at the line.

It was sodden and dreary, the first evening the stranger came in. The lanterns were lit, and a smoky little fire was trying to drive out the chill from the room

here. Harry was at the bar, rolling a dart between his fingers and, I have no doubt, mooning over not having been in a money game for nearly a year. There'd been a lay-off at the wharfs, and several of the men were wondering where their next day's work was coming from. Oh, it was a silent, mournful group we had, and that's a fact.

Then the door banged open and inside, along with a bucket or so of rain, came this little man who looked like nothing so much as a dead rat that somebody'd raised up from the riverbed. He had on a big black cloak that was plastered to his body by the water in it, and a hat with a brim wide enough to have served as an umbrella if it wasn't soaked through.

"I would become dry!" he cried out in a high, reedy voice. "Could I make use of your fire?"

From the way Harry looked at him, the man might have been carved of moldy cheese. "The fire's to warm only those who drink here," said Harry, surly-like. It wasn't his usual way of talking, but I guess the darts business was getting to him.

"Very well, then, pour me something," said the man, dribbling his way across the room toward the fire.

"What'll it be?" growled Harry in return.

"Whatever is least expensive. I have no intention of drinking it. It is merely my rent for the use of the fire."

Well, with that we could all see Harry's shoulders hunch up and his eyes roll in his head. He was proud of the quality of his grog, and here was a mite of a man refusing the drink he was paying for. "What's your name, mister?" hissed Harry through clenched teeth.

"Rels."

"Now then, Mr. Rels—"

"No, no. Not Mister Rels. Simply . . ." He shrugged and spread his hands, palms up. ". . . Rels." He folded his arms and stood there as cocky as a jaybird, facing down the man who could break him in two with a single flick of a hand.

I see, sir, that you're looking at the man behind the bar. Yes, that's the same Rels who came in that night, and yet what a difference there's been since then. Now he wears the gaudy barman's jacket and the sleek doeskin pants. But notice his eyes, wary and frightened, always glancing toward the door. Yet on that first night, while his worn clothing dripped muddy spots on the floor, he stood with the air of a king receiving supplicants.

Harry poured something into a

glass and brought it to Rels, before the fire. "Drink this," he rumbled. It was a command, not an invitation, if you know what I mean.

Rels took a single mouthful, rolled it about his tongue for a second, and then spit the entire thing into the fire. As the ashes hissed we watched Harry's face become as red as the flames. His fists clenched until I thought the bones would crack.

Before he could take any action, Rels glanced over his shoulder and made a grin of yellowing teeth. "Ah, you have a dartboard, I see," he said as if he were in a duke's country house.

Harry's reaction was about the same as letting the air out of a pneumatic tyre. His fists loosened into hands, he let out his breath with a whoosh, and his body seemed to shrink to half its former size.

"You . . . you play?" asked Harry, as gentle as fishing a salmon on a thin leader.

"A bit," Rels answered. "In some quarters I am considered rather good."

"Then perhaps we could have a game. Just the two of us." As you can imagine, sir, by that time the room here was so silent that a feather floating to the floor would have sounded as loud as two lor-

ries in a smashup. We just looked from Harry to Rels, wondering what the little man's answer would be. Finally it came.

"If you like."

"A little wager, then?"

With that, Rels pulled out of that cloak of his a roll of soggy bills the size of a soup can. He peeled off the top one and laid it on the table there. Harry began digging into his own pockets, but before he could come up with any of the ready, Rels pushed his hand down flat over his money.

"I am a stranger, simply come inside to get warm and dry," he said. "If I am to wager with someone unknown to me, I would know the rules under which you play. There are so many types of dart games, and I may not be familiar with yours."

"Fair enough." Harry went to the dartboard. He was trembling all over, but we knew well enough that he'd be steady when the time came. "The big circle here is in twenty parts, like the wedges of a pie. Each of them white wedges has a number next to it, as you see. Around the outside of the circle is a thin band of red, and then there's a smaller inner circle of blue that cuts through all the numbered sections."

Rels nodded his head. "The

board is not different from what I know."

"Very good. I'd not want to take advantage. Now we begin by each throwing three darts at the '1' sector. A dart in there counts a point. If it's in the red line also, it's two points; in the blue is three. Understood?"

"Eminently clear."

"All right. We plays three darts each at all of the first five numbers—or ten, or whatever we agree on—in rotation. At the end, the one with the highest score wins."

"It seems simple enough."

Harry grinned. He always liked to have his opponents feeling that way.

"There is just one thing."

"Yes, Rels. What is it?"

"I have often played darts where there are special restrictions. 'House rules' they are sometimes called. Do such exist here?"

"Well, yes. Three, to be exact. First of all, ties favor the house."

"Am I to understand that if we end the game with the same number of points, you will claim the victory? It hardly seems fair."

"Umm. You do have a point. Still, I hates to change the habits of a lifetime. Tell you what. How big is that bill under your hand?"

Rels lifted his hand kind of slow-like. The bill, being wet,

stuck to it. We could all see that it was a pound note.

Harry dug down into his pocket and came up with a fiver. He slapped it down on the table next to where Rels' money had been. "That'll be our bet," said Harry. "Will that make it fair?"

Rels bowed real low, sticking his leg out in front of him kind of odd-like. His hat fell off, but he left it where it was. "A tie favors you, but the odds favor me," he said. "That is quite fair. You are a gentleman, mine host."

"Call me Harry."

"Very well, Harry. What is the second rule of the house?"

"A dart thrown is a dart scored," was the answer.

"And what means this?"

"Once the dart leaves your hand, it's scored where it hits. Whether it goes into the target, down to the floor, or over to me aunt's in Soho, there's no taking it back for a second try."

"Very good. And the third rule?"

Harry made a little-boy grin. "Scorching is considered a legitimate part of the game," he said, looking Rels straight in the eye.

"Scorching? I'm afraid I don't understand this . . . eh . . . 'scorching.'"

"Oh. Well, that's doing little things to make the other player

nervous while he's shooting. Oh, don't get me wrong. You can't touch the shooter or block his line of vision to the target. But little things to throw him off his game—coughing, creaking a chair or such—are all on the up-and-up."

An odd little twitch began developing around Rels' left eye. "You would deliberately spoil a player's concentration?" he asked.

"Sure. More's the fun when you make it succeed. Besides, you can try it on me, too." Fat chance of its succeeding, of course, sir. Old Harry'd been scorched by experts, and it'd never fazed him once. He was like a machine once he faced the target.

"I don't think I could bring myself to do that, Harry."

"Up to you. I intend to, if it suits me. Do we play, then?"

"But of course." Rels shucked off his cloak. Underneath he was wearing a wrinkled white shirt and pants cut a queer way, kind of full at the knees and tapering down to the ankles.

"I'll go first, if you like," said Harry. "Shall we make it a game of ten?"

"Whatever you like. It is but a game, eh?"

But once they'd started, all of us could see that it was more than a game. Harry started off. He put all three darts in the 1 wedge,

with one in the red, for a total of four. But his smile was wiped from his face when Rels put his darts in the same sector, one of 'em almost into the blue stripe: 4 to 3, Harry's favor.

In the second wedge, one of Harry's darts just missed. Rels got two in, but one was in the blue: 7 to 6, with Rels leading.

For the first time ever in a dart game, we caught the look of fear crossing Harry's face. Yes, fear, and over a mere dart game. Harry McCauley was finally being forced into the realization that he might be defeated.

He tried to draw ahead in the next three wedges, but Rels kept right with him. Halfway through the game the score stood at 18 evens. Little Rels, up to that point, was just as good as Harry.

In wedge six, however, Harry picked up a point, and in the next one, two more: 25 to 22, and Harry was looking more his old self. Rels, when he wasn't shooting, kept looking at his throwing hand as if he was angry with it for not doing what it was told.

Wedge eight was even. Harry still held his three-point advantage.

In the ninth section, Harry scored four. He looked to be a certain winner, especially when Rels' first dart went wide. But

then, grinding his teeth loud enough to be heard all through the room, that little mouse of a man thudded two into the red.

Still, Harry was three points up, going into the last wedge. And he added three more to that, with three quick darts into the white.

He turned about to face us, put his hands on his hips, and roared loud enough to rattle the window. He went behind the bar to fetch a full bottle of gin. We laughed and shouted right along with him, knowing as we did that a six-point advantage meant that the game was as good as won, and then there'd be drinks on the house. But there was a sudden thunk behind Harry and then another, and then we weren't laughing anymore.

Rels had scored a double-blue. Six points, and the game was even. And Rels still had one more dart to throw.

Still gripping the bottle by its neck, Harry walked over and looked down at Rels like the little man had slapped him. Harry's face was red, and his eyes were wide, that's how angry he was. And the twitch by Rels' eye now seemed to be pulling at the whole side of his face. I doubt that any generals in battle were ever as determined to win as both of those two blokes were to come out

ahead in this simple little game.

Rels turned toward the target. Slowly he raised the dart level with his eye—the one that wasn't twitching. He drew back his arm, and you could see from the set of his muscles that he was ready to throw.

And that's when Harry brought the gin bottle smashing down against the edge of the table.

There was a crashing of glass and the stink of gin. A few men shouted their surprise at the loud sound.

Rels' dart didn't come near the target. It stuck in the plaster near the calendar there, a good two feet off the mark:

"Ties favor the house, Rels. I win. Sorry, old man." With a big jack-o-lantern smile, Harry went over and scooped the two bills off the table where they lay. "Well, I won a pound," he said loudly. "Almost enough to pay for that bottle of gin."

"That is unjust!" squealed Rels in that high voice of his. "I demand to—"

"A dart thrown is a dart scored." Harry made a nasty laugh as he went behind the bar and began pouring drinks. He made an extra-large one and shoved it toward Rels. "Here you are," he said. "No hard feelings. At least you know now what

scorching is all about, old man."

"I do not drink with dogs, Mr. Harry whatever your name is," snarled Rels. "I leave this sink of degradation. But my humiliation will not go unavenged." And with that he stomped out into the rain, snatching up his cloak and hat and slamming the door shut behind him.

All this over a game of darts? I tell you, sir, I couldn't understand it at all. Oh no, that's not the end of the story. Just get us a refill like a good chap, and I'll go on with what happened next.

There we are. Look, Rels knows I'm talking about him. His eyes are on us like a ferret watching a wounded rat. Still, he won't do anything. He's even shorter than he looks. There's a platform behind the bar for him to walk on.

What's he doing in here, you ask. That's the next part of the story. Yes, the ale is good, isn't it?

It was four evenings later that Rels came into the Lord Nelson's Arm again. I suppose I was one of the few to notice when he first entered, because Harry hadn't turned the lights up yet, and Rels was wearing that dark cloak and hat. He slipped into a chair at the table nearest the dartboard, ordered something from a barmaid, and then waited with folded hands until old Harry noticed him.

"Back again, Rels?" boomed Harry as soon as he laid eyes on the little man. "Well, if I was you, I wouldn't try to start nothing in here. If you was to create a row, I'd have to—"

"I am not the fool you think I am," Rels told him in a kind of a purr. "To risk hand-to-hand combat with you would be an act of the sheerest idiocy on my part. I merely wished to know whether you were brave enough to play another round of darts with me."

For a time Harry didn't say a thing. It was like he was taking the measure of the little man at the table. But finally he leaned down close, hunching those huge shoulders of his.

"Same rules?" he asked.

"But of course. One respects the wishes of his host."

Kind of sneering, Harry whirled about. "Listen, all you blokes!" he bellowed. "The little toff here wants a rematch at the dartboard. Gather round. Last time I let him get close, but this time I intend to whip him proper."

You can't half imagine how soon it was that we was grouped around the board and the table where Rels was sitting. Harry gave him his choice of darts.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Harry?" Rels asked.

"Forgetting? Forgetting what?"

"The wager," Rels told him.

"Why, I just figured it'd be the same as last time. A pound to a fiver."

"No, Harry, that is for beggars. Let us have a serious match, you and I."

"All right. You name the stakes. I'll match, at five-to-one, same as last time."

Rels' finger kind of bored a hole in the air as it pointed toward Harry. "You have said it."

With that, Rels hauled out of that cloak of his a wad of money bigger than he'd had the first time. But now it wasn't a pound note on top. It was a twenty.

"I have here the sum of thirty-five hundred pounds, Harry. This is all I was able to raise. To lose this would leave me a pauper."

"I . . . Look, Rels, I haven't got that kind of money."

"I know. I have checked your resources during the last few days. You see, it is my intent that one of us will leave this inn without a penny to his name."

"You mean . . ."

"Exactly, Harry. I have ascertained that the Lord Nelson's Arm is valued at about eighteen thousand pounds. Near enough, for all practical purposes, to the five-to-one odds we had before."

"But I couldn't bet this place. It's all I have."

"If you are afraid, Harry—if you feel you lack the necessary skill to best me—then just admit it, and I will leave this place to be seen no more."

As you might guess, Harry was in a fix for fair. Outside of darts, this pub was his whole life. On the other hand, how could he admit—even to himself—that he was ducking a challenge at darts?

We could hear the clock ticking, it was that silent, before Harry made up his mind. Finally he called to the barmaid for pen and paper and scrawled a few lines. "Here!" he said, slapping the note down onto the table. "Here's a letter signing the Lord Nelson's Arm over to you. Win and you take it. Lose and I own your entire bankroll and be damned to you. Now then, guest's privilege—will you play first or last?"

"First," answered Rels. "You may throw the final darts of the game."

The beginning of the second game might have been a copy of the first. Harry'd get a point or so advantage, and then Rels would catch up and pass. For the first seven sections I wouldn't have wagered a shilling against either of 'em, to say nothing of eighteen thousand quid. Nobody said a word. We just watched Harry and

Rels, both with sweat running down their faces, and listened to the "thwack" of the darts as they hit the board. Even the extra barman didn't use the time to steal himself an extra drink or two.

At the end of seven, they were all square: 25 each.

On the eighth wedge, Harry cut the red and took a one-point advantage. In the ninth, Rels not only regained that but picked up an extra one.

So they went into the tenth with Rels ahead by a single point.

Rels wiped his hands on his frilled shirt as he stood for his last turn. His first dart seemed to wobble slightly in flight and almost missed the target completely. No score.

His second pinged against the wire that separated each section, and there was a rush to see where it had gone home. "Another miss," the barman finally called out.

A tide of relief flooded across Harry's face. A double miss, and with only a single point separating them! Now it'd be easy to . . .

Rels threw the last dart almost casually at the board. The gasp that went up could have been heard above Big Ben's chimes.

It was in the ten sector, dead in the blue: three points.

For almost a minute Harry just stared at that dart, hoping it'd dis-

appear or something. Now he was four points down, and with only three darts to make it up. I'd never thought to see Harry McCauley on the edge of tears, but he was that, that night.

Harry went to the line, took a deep breath, and cast his first dart as if it were a sleeping child he dared not waken. One point. That was no good. He needed at least one red.

He got it with the second dart.

"Well," he said, hitching up his pants. "That makes it a bit of a different thing, doesn't it, Rels? Just a single point needed to tie. And ties favor the house. We both know that, don't we?"

"Your third dart, Harry," Rels answered calmly.

Harry steadied himself at the line. He peered at the board through wide eyes. Finally he raised his hand to sight along the dart.

There was a rustling and then a thump of something heavy being placed on the table where Rels sat. Harry let his body go limp and turned to see what it was.

Rels was seated, his eyes kind of studying Harry. On the table in front of him was a revolver—one of the biggest handguns I've ever seen in my life. Black and shining, it looked like it could be mounted on wheels and used as artillery.

"You . . . you wouldn't do something foolish, would you, Rels?" Harry asked kind of nervous-like. "I mean, there's witnesses and all."

"The gun is legally mine to carry. Play, Harry."

Harry turned toward the board again. He raised the dart. And then we all heard a sound that made our blood chill in our bodies.

It was the double "click-click" of the hammer of that pistol being cocked. Rels had got up with the weapon in his hand. He was leaning across the table, balancing on his left hand, which was flattened on the rough boards—and the muzzle of the gun was pointed straight at Harry's head.

Never have I seen a man move so quick as did Harry McCauley then. He whirled, and with a flick of his wrist he sent his last dart squarely through the flesh of Rels' left hand, pinning it to the table. At the same time someone jerked the gun out of his other fist.

Kind of slow, Rels reached over with his free hand and pulled the dart out. Then he wrapped his injured hand in a handkerchief. There weren't much blood, but Rels' face was whiter than purity. Still he managed a smile.

"A dart thrown is a dart scored," Harry," he whispered. "I

win the bet—by that single point.”

“But that ain’t right. I mean, how’s a man to go on, thinking at any moment he’ll be dead?”

“The gun isn’t real. It’s a model—for collectors. It won’t shoot.”

“But I couldn’t have known that. Besides, it’s damned unfair to pull a gun on another man when he’s—”

“I believe it’s what you called ‘scorching.’ And now, Harry, do me the courtesy of leaving my inn.” He picked up Harry’s note with a flourish.

I thought for a bit that Harry was going to smash Rels’ skull as the little man thrust the paper deep into a pocket. But then someone in the back began to titter, almost like a woman. Another took it up, and another until the room was bubbling and roiling with whoops and shrieks of laughter.

The thing of it was, it was Harry McCauley they was laughing at. He knew it, too. He’d been caught in his own kind of trickery, and the many who’d lost

money to him were getting back a bit of their own. I got caught up in it myself, never realizing that a man of Harry’s pride couldn’t stand to be laughed at. By the time we’d calmed down again to where we could speak without bursting out again, Harry was gone out the front door.

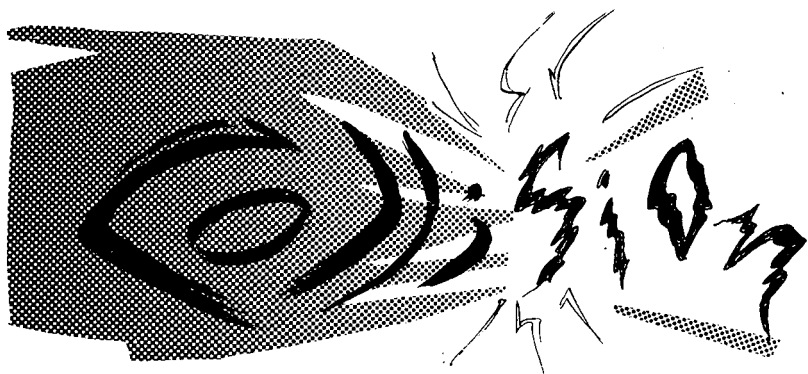
And he ain’t been back since, sir. Rels took over the running of the place, as was his right.

Oh, I see. You still don’t understand why we meet here of evenings, waiting for something. We know Harry McCauley, that’s why. We’re sure that he won’t have it said that Rels got the best of him for good and all. Right now Harry’s out there somewhere, working and saving his money. And one day he’ll come back through that door with the challenger’s wager—one-fifth of the worth of the Lord Nelson’s Arm. Then he and Rels will play at darts again. But this time Harry will have a new trick or two up his sleeve.

Now there’s a game none of us would want to miss.



One who evades the law may discover he was also guilty of exceedingly poor judgment.



I do a lot of traveling by car. In fact, since the airlines began searching passengers and their luggage, that's the only way I travel. I have secrets and I want to keep them.

I probably see the remains of one or two wrecked cars every day I'm on the road, and I sometimes arrive at an accident scene before the mess has been cleaned up. I had thought I was hardened to the sight of crash victims, but one evening on the Pennsylvania Turnpike I discovered I was wrong. I had slowed to pass a

parked ambulance and a pair of state police cruisers, and I saw, framed in searchlights, a sight I wouldn't be able to forget in a hurry.

She had been young, no more than sixteen or seventeen, and she was never going to get any older. She wore high heels, jeans and a

by Al Nussbaum

legalize-marijuana T-shirt, a typically incongruous, youthful combination. Her hair was long, blonde and straight. She had on flame-red lipstick, and blue-lensed sunglasses dangled from one ear.

No, she wasn't lying peacefully alongside the roadway—she dangled crookedly ten feet above it, impaled on the steel rung of a telephone pole that had pierced her back and burst through her chest. While two white-garbed medical technicians worked to free the body and lower it to the ground, the state police stared at the passing traffic or their shoes.

The scene was easy to read. There was a beat-up little car parked on the shoulder of the road with a flat tire. A pale-faced boy sat in the front seat, tears making shiny tracks down his cheeks. Before the police arrived with their flares and spotlights, this had been an exceptionally dark stretch of road. The young couple had pulled onto the shoulder to fix the flat, and a passing car had hit the girl with enough force to send her body soaring. There was no other civilian car near the cluster of official vehicles, so the other driver had hit and run.

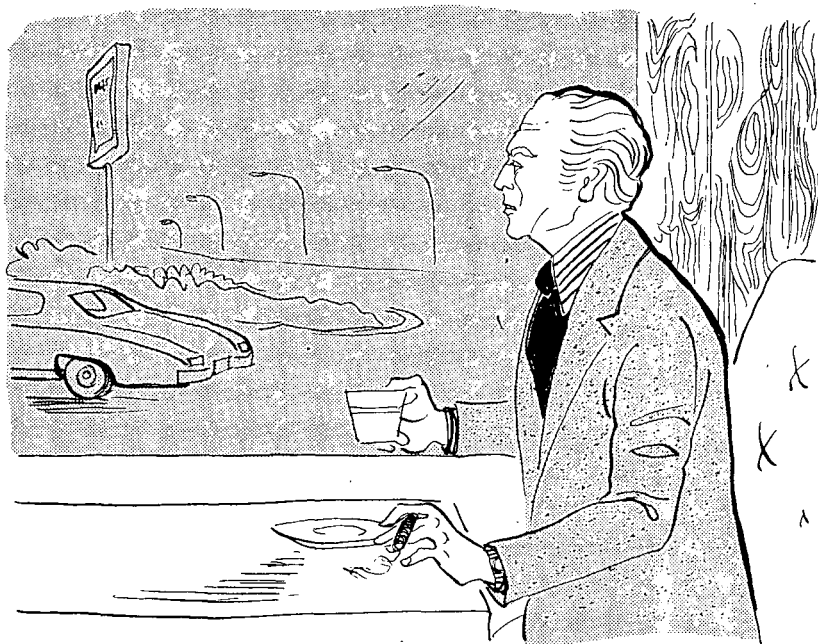
A couple of hundred yards past the accident scene, several drivers had pulled off the road to be sick.

I had a sour taste in my mouth. I lowered my window, cleared my throat and spit onto the roadway. It didn't help.

I always drive carefully, never exceeding the posted speed limit. Now, because of the hit-and-run, I reduced my speed to ten miles per hour below the maximum. The police would be out in force, and I didn't want to take any chance of being stopped. I figured I could survive police scrutiny provided it wasn't too thorough, but I didn't want my faith put to a test if I could avoid it.

I drove for another thirty or forty miles before deciding to stop for food and fuel at a service area. It was two in the morning and Philadelphia, my destination, was still a long way off. I had an attendant top my tank, then pulled around and parked beside the restaurant. I got out and carefully locked the car. There's no use placing temptation in anyone's path.

I was at the counter, drinking my second cup of coffee and thinking about the score I had planned in Philadelphia, when I got the feeling I was being watched. I swung around on the stool. The only one behind me was a well-dressed man with graying temples, sitting in a booth. Through the window beside him I



could see my sedan with its Utah license plate.

The man didn't seem to be interested in me, and he was far too well dressed to be a cop. His suit, cuff links, watch and diamond ring gave him a net worth of over \$5,000 right where he sat. My face isn't the one I was born with. He could not have recognized me from some old picture, so I put him out of my mind. I turned back to my coffee.

When I got up to leave, I noticed that he followed me out. I turned right and he went left. I paused, pretending to look at something in the gift shop win-

dow, and watched him walk to an expensive-looking foreign sports car that was parked by itself at the rear of the lot. The bright red finish of its rear deck looked like about twenty coats of hand-rubbed lacquer.

He wasn't behind me on the ramp leading back to the turnpike, and I watched my rear-view mirror for following headlights. There were none. I settled down to a comfortable forty mph, but continued to glance in the rear-view mirror from time to time. Something about that guy back at the service area was bugging me.

Then, after I had gone about

two or three miles, I noticed a dark shape rapidly overtaking me. It was a car, traveling without lights, and it had to be going at least eighty mph. Instead of pulling out to pass, it seemed to be using my taillights as a target. When a collision seemed certain, I jammed my accelerator to the floor and leaned back against the headrest to minimize the shock of impact.

It probably didn't help much, but I managed to keep from snapping my neck. I lost control of my car and it was literally catapulted off the road and into a nearby drainage ditch. The car came to rest, leaning precariously with its right-hand wheels in the ditch and the others on the road shoulder. The other vehicle continued along for another couple of hundred yards, spraying the road with water, oil and pieces of its engine, before skidding to a halt.

The driver climbed out and came strolling back to me with a flashlight in his hand as casually as an old lady out for a morning walk. Predictably, it was the well-dressed man from the restaurant.

I unfastened my seat belt and shoulder harness and pulled myself out of the wreck. The rear end of my car had been caved in at least a foot. The gas tank had been ruptured and raw fuel was leaking

into the ditch and forming a puddle under the car. The gasoline fumes were strong.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I ignored him. I was too angry to talk. I made a mental vow to cut his heart out with a rusty tire iron if my car burned before I could get everything out of it. That seemed fair.

By the time the state police arrived, I had retrieved my suitcases from the trunk, and my sample case and clothing bag from the back seat. I was seated comfortably on the sample case and no one would have suspected I was thinking of murder.

As soon as the cruiser came to a stop, the well-dressed man ran up to it. "Officers! Officers!" he shouted. "Arrest that man. He cut me off and deliberately wrecked my car."

I glanced up to find him pointing an accusing finger at me. There was a defiant gleam in his eyes, as though he were challenging me to contradict him.

"Calm down, Mr. Anderson. We'll take care of him," one of the troopers said.

If I had been planning to argue, that's all I would have needed to change my mind. The police knew him. He was "Mr. Anderson" to them. His word was automatically better than mine.

"Don't believe a thing he tells you," Anderson said. "He's probably drunk and certainly a lunatic."

I remained where I was until the troopers approached. Then I stood up and presented my Utah driver's license and the registration for the car. They were impressive documents. I didn't know what a genuine Utah driver's license or registration looked like, but I was sure they couldn't look any more authentic than the ones my printer had designed. It wasn't necessary for the papers to be duplicates of the real thing because few people in the East would know what they were supposed to look like anyhow.

The driver's license was printed in royal blue on gold paper, and carried both my thumb print and an embossed photo of me in full color. The registration was also printed in blue, but on a lighter weight gold paper, and it carried a serial number that matched the license plates on my wrecked car. The metal tags would have to be removed and examined carefully before anyone could tell they were actually several years old and had been altered and repainted.

The trooper looked at the papers and put them in his pocket. "You heard Mr. Anderson. What

d'ya have to say for yourself?"

I shrugged and held my hands out, palms up, in a gesture of helplessness. "Not much I can say, Officer. I guess that's the way it looked to Mr. Anderson. I may have cut in a little too closely when I passed him, but that isn't what caused the accident. Without thinking, I slammed on my brakes to keep from hitting a deer, forcing Mr. Anderson to ram into me. That's how it happened."

Anderson's head jerked in surprise and in the light from the police cruiser's headlights I could see his eyes narrow.

"Does that seem plausible to you, Mr. Anderson?" one of the troopers asked.

"Yes . . . yes, I suppose so," Anderson conceded.

I don't know what was going through Anderson's head, but I was hoping they wouldn't go back up the road, looking for skid marks, because they wouldn't find any.

Right then the wrecker from an enterprising salvage yard pulled up. The driver must have been monitoring the police frequency and overheard the troopers call in our position when they first spotted us.

I got the guy to pull my car out of the fuel-filled ditch, but told him I preferred to leave it

where it was until after I had notified my insurance company. He tried to give me a sales pitch about it costing me more if he had to make a special trip, but I stood firm. I didn't want my car locked in some salvage yard where I couldn't get to it. Anderson hired him to drag the sports car off the turnpike, and that seemed to satisfy him. He could handle only one car at a time anyhow.

So, as the wrecker pulled away, towing the red sports car, Anderson and I climbed into the back seat of the cruiser and were taken to the state police barracks to fill out an accident report.

I asked the trooper to return my papers so I could have the information they contained for the report. He handed them over without hesitation. He had swallowed my version of the collision.

Anderson, on the other hand, kept giving me sidelong glances as we stood at a long counter filling out the reports. He couldn't figure out why I had lied, and the puzzle had him worried. I handed out a few sidelong looks myself, but only to get his address from the form he was filling out. I didn't speak to him. There would be time for that later, and there had to be a better place.

When the state police were fin-

ished with me, I went to the nearest town and rented a car. I returned to the turnpike and my wrecked car. I removed the license plates, then took the panel off the inside of the door on the passenger side. In the space where the window mechanism should have been, I had a submachine gun with a folding stock, a silenced .22 caliber automatic, a set of emergency identification papers, and enough hundred dollar bills to buy a good lawyer or rent a bad judge.

I stopped a mile down the road just long enough to bury the Utah license plates. I tore up the phony driver's license and registration and dropped them into the hole, too. In this age of computers, the collision made it certain they would be exposed; however, if the authorities didn't actually have the plates and documents, they'd have no way of knowing how authentic they were, or of trying to trace them to their source.

I made Anderson's address my next stop. He didn't have a home—he had an estate. His rambling, ranch-style house was set in the middle of thirty acres of imaginative landscaping. I followed a winding driveway and pulled up in front of the house just as a pink dawn was breaking.

Anderson opened the door with-

out waiting for me to ring. "I've been waiting for you," he said.

"Of course," I replied, causing the satisfied smirk to slide from his lips.

There was an awkward pause, then Anderson invited me in by stepping backward a few paces. "Come to my den," he said. "We can talk there. My wife and the servants are asleep."

Once the door to the den was firmly closed behind us, I took out my silenced pistol and pointed it at his head. "You have cost me a lot of money," I said. "How much cash do you have in the house? I don't want to kill you over money."

"You know, don't you?"

"Of course I know. If you didn't want to be found out you should at least have picked a car that was headed in the other direction."

He frowned. "I didn't think of that."

"You should have. No one smashes up his car the way you did without good reason. It only took a few seconds to realize you

did it to hide damage sustained earlier. You're the one who hit the young girl and kept going. You were probably drunk, but sobered up in a hurry. Then, knowing they'd be watching for the damaged car at all the exits, you decided to get some damage you could explain."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

I ignored his question and asked one of my own: "Are you going to make me kill you over money?"

He seemed to take notice of the pistol for the first time. "I thought you'd want money. I have all my ready cash in that box on the desk." He gestured to it. "If that's not enough I can sell some stock certificates and have more for you in a week or two."

I didn't bother to look into the box. "That'll be enough," I said. Then I killed him with two shots in his heart.

I didn't kill him over money. I was thinking of the young girl hanging from the telephone pole. That seemed like reason enough.



There are times, apparently, when a debt of gratitude attains the status of a weapon.



The Brave Man's Sword

that distance, and the hat had cost three dollars! A sinful extravagance, Livia had called it.

Eleanor made a swift, bold decision. She ripped out the anchor-



Eleanor Marks descended from the trolley at her usual stop, stepped out into the spring dusk and the soft drizzle, then hesitated beneath the shelter of the first elm.

Aunt Livia would be angry with her if she got her new hat damp. Aunt Livia had warned her that morning to take her umbrella, hadn't she? Wise Aunt Livia! It was three blocks from the trolley stop to home. Even the gentlest drizzle could dampen a hat in

ing pin, doffed the hat, slipped it inside her coat, carefully, so as not to crush either the wide brim or the artificial daisies.

How glorious it was to walk bareheaded in the rain! After a long day in the suffocating dust and gloom of the library, this was intoxicating to all her senses. Aunt

Livia would scold her just as sternly if her hair got wet. A twenty-three-year-old niece shouldn't be scolded for such a trifle, but let her do it!

I love you, earth! Eleanor Marks whispered the crazy words silently inside her head. I love you, air . . . I love you, sky . . . I love you, rain . . .

C. B. Gifford

She wanted to run, but did not dare. These were her only moments of freedom, the three-block journey to the trolley in the morning, and the three blocks home again at night. There was no freedom in the library, and certainly none in Livia's house. So run now—but there was another pedestrian on the opposite sidewalk, and people might recognize her as she passed beneath a street lamp. Therefore she didn't run, but she did enjoy the rain in her hair, and the house came soon enough.

She walked up the path slowly, reluctantly. On the porch she paused for another breath or two, savoring a last whiff of the humid fragrance of the oncoming night. Then sadly, like a maiden parting from her lover's good-night kiss, she opened the door and went in-

side with a feeling of resignation.

Silence, a palpable thing, struck her physically at the moment of her entrance. Always, or almost always, Livia's sharp ears detected even the stealthiest click of the door, and her imperious call came from wherever she happened to be in the house. "Eleanor, is that you, dear?"

There was no such call tonight. Livia watched the clock constantly, worried if her niece were minutes late. Where was she, then? The front hall was gloomy, one small bulb burning frugally in the table lamp. Eleanor hung her hat and coat on the hall tree. The hat was none the worse for its experience. She primped before the mirror. Yes, her high-piled hair was a bit damp, but her face glowed, even in the dimness.

I'm pretty, she thought. Not beautiful, but pretty. Pretty enough to . . . to what? Marry?

That frivolous notion was suddenly replaced by an awareness of something else. The house was not merely silent. It contained a dreadful, stony silence—and it was chilly. Without her coat, Eleanor shivered. "Livia!" she called, but not loudly, not in Livia's authoritative tones, a plaintive cry. "Aunt Livia!"

Only the silence answered her. Strange. Livia seldom left the

house, and never, *never* left it at dinner time when her niece and nephew were due to return from their jobs.

"Bertie!"

The silence—absolute, no, not absolute—a tiny sound intervened. The old clock ticked away in the parlor, but there was no sound of *breathing* anywhere. No one was *breathing* in the house.

Frightened now, though without knowing why, Eleanor began her search. The parlor was dark, empty. So were the dining room and the kitchen. In the last, there was not the faintest sign of the preparation for the evening meal. She opened the cellar door, peered, called down into the blackness. "Livia!" No answer.

Dreading it, sensing somehow that if Aunt Livia were to be found in her bedroom, something awful must have happened, she returned to the hall and began slowly to ascend the stairs. The bare boards, polished to a shine but terribly old, creaked as she trod each one—the only sounds. She didn't cry Livia's name. She was afraid now.

The door to her aunt's bedroom was shut, and no light shone from beneath it. The other two doors, to Bertie's room and hers, were open, as Livia demanded they always should be when their resi-

dents were not occupying them. Odd that Livia's own door was closed as she kept her door open as much as possible, so as to be aware of what went on in the rest of the house. Yet it was closed now, and the room was dark. Was Livia asleep? Impossible . . .

Eleanor knocked on the closed door. No answer. She knocked again. "Aunt Livia!" No answer. Alarmed, she turned the knob and pushed gently. The door resisted just a bit. That resistance frightened her too. It was as if something were on the other side—nothing very large or strong, but it was pushing against her. She persisted, until the opening was wide enough for her to pass through.

She hesitated, however. The room was dark. Again she thought, there was no *breathing*. Livia couldn't be in there. But what was that other little sound? "Aunt Livia . . ."

Then, somehow not till then, she'd been straining so hard to hear, just to hear something . . . then her sense of smell came suddenly alive. *Gas!*

She screamed. The sound, issuing from her own throat, reverberated painfully in her ears, but she couldn't stop. She pushed the door wider open, fumbled for the light switch. The ceiling light, a

single dim bulb, came on, and with an enormous effort of will, Eleanor took a step inside—and saw Aunt Livia there on the bed.

She clapped both her hands to her mouth, to stop her own screaming, and to keep from inhaling the awful gas.

There was an interim during which Eleanor was only vaguely aware of surrounding events. Bertie's arrival, his bursting through the front door, summoned perhaps by her screaming; his rushing up the stairs, shoving past her into the room; his handkerchief over his face, rushing to the gas heater and turning it off, opening the windows. Then came the worst part, while she stood helplessly and fearfully in the hallway outside, Bertie bending over Aunt Livia, starting to lift her, to carry her from that contaminated room, but then changing his mind and easing his burden back onto the bed, then coming out.

"She's dead."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Bring her out into the fresh air."

"It's no use. She's dead."

"She can't be."

"Go in and see for yourself. The gas is clearing now. There's no pulse. No heartbeat. She's ice-

cold. Go in. You only have to touch her . . ."

"No . . . no . . . I can't!"

Then they both went back downstairs, to the parlor. Bertie switched on a lamp. They sat down in chairs facing each other, on opposite sides of the fireplace, and they were silent for a long time.

"Shouldn't we call someone?" It was eventually Eleanor who spoke first, after the silence had grown very, very long. "A doctor?"

"No use," Bertie answered. "She's dead."

"But isn't there something—a death certificate?"

"No hurry. Let the gas clear out completely."

Eleanor's thoughts did not arrange themselves around the new circumstance very quickly: Aunt Livia dead; the only real parent she and Bertie had ever had, or at least the only one she remembered. The sudden emptiness was immense, mysterious.

She stared at Bertie—at his profile actually, because he was staring into the cold, black fireplace. His face thin, almost gaunt—handsome, some had said—the face of a poet, looked anguished now. His pale, slender hands were clasped tightly together in his lap. His shoulders hunched, he sat very still.

"She committed suicide." He uttered the dreadful word in a whisper.

"Why?"

"Perhaps there's a note somewhere. I didn't see one, though."

"But what possible reason—"

"I can think of many. She was ill, for one."

Eleanor's mind, beginning to recover from the shock, rebelled. "She complained constantly, yes," she argued, "but we both agreed she was a hypochondriac. Hypochondriacs don't commit suicide."

"Perhaps she was more ill than she pretended."

"She never went to a doctor that we know of."

"She was old," Bertie said.

"Fifty-four?"

"The fifties are the time when serious illnesses begin."

"I think she would have told us. Livia used her ailments, imaginary or otherwise, as a weapon against us. You've said so yourself."

Bertie turned his head and stared now at her, his dark eyes burning. "That's it, of course," he said, his voice suddenly loud. He stood up and paced on the parlor rug.

She watched him for a moment. "What's 'it'?" she asked finally.

At the fireplace he stopped and confronted her. "Remember," he began, "how Livia often lectured

us? We were orphans, and she took us in. She sacrificed her whole life for us, never married. Of course she was already a spinster of thirty-five when she took us in but we never dared mention that little discrepancy. Still there's no doubt that she sacrificed for our sakes. She spent her inheritance on rearing us rather than traveling abroad or something of the sort. Anyway, she never ceased reminding us of the fact, did she?"

Eleanor shrugged.

"The debt of gratitude we owed her, that was her weapon," Bertie went on excitedly. "That's why I work down at the mill office, and why you're in the library, and why we both live here in this house. Because when we started to become old enough to live our own lives, Livia started to complain. We couldn't very well go off and leave a sick, helpless woman who had sacrificed her whole life for us, now could we?"

Eleanor shook her head. "But why, then, should she commit suicide?"

"To set us free!" Bertie almost shouted.

Still Eleanor failed to comprehend. "After all these years of trying to hold us here, why should she want to set us free?"

"Either," Bertie replied

triumphantly, "because she actually was very ill, or because she had a change of heart—or both!"

Eleanor stood up and faced him. "That doesn't make sense to me," she announced. "I can't accept it." She turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Upstairs," she told him over her shoulder. "Perhaps Livia did leave a note."

She heard him following her on the stairs, but he didn't remonstrate. At the doorway to Livia's room she hesitated. The odor of gas was still strong, but it was bearable. Summoning all her courage, she stepped inside.

The first item which lured her eyes was, of course, the corpse on the bed. There was no doubt of its being a corpse, but nevertheless she forced herself to go closer, to the very side of the bed.

Livia lay there very peacefully. Whatever had been her motivation, it certainly appeared now that she had been serene in her decision. Her face was placid, with perhaps even the hint of a tiny smile at the corners of her mouth. Fifty-four; she looked her age, no more, no less—but how much she resembled Bertie!

The body was fully clothed, except for shoes; the dark-green dress, old, worn. Livia had not be-

lieved in spending much for wardrobe. It was typical that she should die in that old green dress. Too, she had pulled aside the fine old bedspread, a relic from the distant past, and lay instead on the faded quilt beneath—typical also. She had lain here deliberately to die.

"She looks very content," Bertie said from behind her.

Eleanor tore her gaze from her dead aunt. "Let's look for a note," she suggested.

The search didn't take very long. A suicide note is always left in a very conspicuous place. There was none.

"I just don't understand," Eleanor persisted.

"Well, all right," Bertie said. "You may not understand her motives, but it's very clear she knew what she was doing. See, the rags on both the windowsills—remember how she always complained of drafts and how those windows fitted poorly. In the winter she always stuffed rags in the cracks. So today she wanted to take no chances of the gas leaking away."

Yes, it was true. A mild breeze wafted through the windows, and in it, from each festooned windowsill, the rags fluttered. Others were still snugly stuffed around the upper window edges; all of Livia's old dust rags, now banners

of death for the silenced Livia.

"I remember," Eleanor said, "that the door was just a little hard to open. I suppose there were rags there too."

Yes, also true. Cloths were still clinging to the inside bottom edge of the door. She had dusted the floor with them as she had pushed the door inward. She stared at them now.

"Bertie!"

"What?"

In three steps she crossed from the bed to those rags, stooped, and lifted one of them from the others. Then she whirled.

"Bertie!" She thrust the thing toward him. "This is your shirt!"

"So it is."

"Why was it there?"

He seemed to hesitate, to swallow. "I suppose Livia couldn't find enough old rags."

"This is one of your nicest shirts. I bought it for you Christmas before last."

"Yes, I remember."

"Livia wouldn't have used something of yours. She'd have used something of her own. Something in this room. Something that would have been useless after she was dead."

He gazed back at her for a long time. Although she still held the shirt toward him, he refused to take it. "What are you trying to

say?" he asked Eleanor finally.

She felt strange, carried along on some current more powerful than herself. Her words seemed not to be contrived in her brain, but to spring to first life on her lips. "Who put your shirt under Livia's door, Bertie?"

His eyes blazed. "Are you saying that I did?"

"Did you?"

"Those rags, including the shirt, were stuffed under the door from *inside* the room."

For an eternity they confronted each other, neither breathing. Then she turned from him, toward the door again, knelt, lowered her face to the floor, peered at the bottom edge of the door, to corroborate something she knew already to be fact. Then she slowly rose again, faced her brother.

"There's a clearance," she told him, "of almost an inch between the floor and the bottom of the door. You stuffed the windows first, went outside, closed the door, and pushed the rags under with a stick or a ruler or something. Then you discovered you didn't have quite enough. You didn't want to open the door again, so you got the handiest thing, something of your own."

He was attempting to smile, but the smile didn't quite emerge. His voice quavered. "Eleanor, are you

trying to play detective or something?"

"Livia would never . . . *never* . . . *never* . . . in the process of committing suicide, go to your room and get one of your good shirts, not when there were plenty of things right in here."

"Eleanor!"

"It was you, wasn't it, Bertie?"

He exploded now. "And what was dear Aunt Livia doing while I was stuffing rags?"

"No doubt she was asleep. You know where she kept her sleeping powders. Probably you slipped some of them into her tea."

"When?"

"Did you leave your office to come home to lunch today, Bertie? Or did you leave on some other excuse, and stay away for quite some time? Shall I call your boss, Mr. Pearson, and ask him if you were absent from the office for a while?"

At that, he grabbed the shirt from her hand, turned away fiercely, paced for a moment, then stopped at the foot of the bed, glaring down at the corpse. "She was ill," he said hoarsely.

Eleanor was implacable, like an avenging angel. "Was she really?"

"Whether her illness was real," he answered, "or whether she was only pretending, the result was the same. If it was real, this was a

mercy-killing. If she was only pretending, she was being selfish. A selfish person is the most miserable of humans. I saved her from herself. Look at the expression on her face. She's free of us. No more responsibility. If we escaped, and left her, she'd be here alone. Lonely. There was no other way out. Can't you see the smile on her face, Eleanor? She died happy. Remember what Oscar Wilde said? 'Each man kills the thing he loves.' I loved her, Eleanor. I shall be eternally grateful to her. 'Each man kills the thing he loves. The coward does it with a kiss. The brave man with a sword.' That's what the poem says, Eleanor."

He turned to her then, took a step. She backed away, but he pursued, slowly, relentlessly.

"And there were ourselves to think of, Eleanor." He spoke softly now, urgently. "We've never had lives of our own. You . . . you're pretty, you know. What did Livia do to the young men who came to call? None of them came a second time, did they? I could see you shriveling up, day by day. She was ruining your life. I did this thing for you, Eleanor. Perhaps mostly for you."

It was then that she choked and ran, out of that place of death, down the stairs . . .

She sat in the parlor for a very long time, first trying to control her violent trembling, then her thoughts. The trembling ceased eventually, but the thoughts persisted—and they were ugly.

There were no sounds from above. She couldn't imagine what Bertie might be doing. He wasn't pacing. There were no rugs in any of the bedrooms. She would have heard his footsteps. He was probably wrestling with his conscience, as was she.

Finally, however, after perhaps an hour—someone had to make the first move—she did hear his footsteps on the stairs. She waited impatiently, for he was descending very slowly. Then he appeared in the doorway, like a gaunt ghost in the dimness.

"Well?" she asked.

Though he looked straight at her, he made no answer. His eyes seemed to have sunk into their sockets.

"Are you going to the police?" she pressed him.

He remained motionless on the threshold. "The police? Why?"

"Aunt Livia did not die a natural death. Such cases always must be reported to the police." She waited hopefully, but he did not respond. "Then I shall have to go."

"And what will you tell them?"

"I'll tell them the truth, Bertie."

"Will you tell them about my shirt?"

"If I don't, then I would become an accessory."

He walked past her, to the fireplace, and stood staring into it. He looked so thin, so beaten, so helpless. Impulsively she rose and took a step toward him.

"But I'll tell them the whole truth," she promised. "You loved Aunt Livia. I have no doubt of that. So I won't say that it was . . . murder. Because you were . . . you were . . ."

"Sick?" he finished for her, without turning. "Sick in the head? Will you vouch for that?"

"I will say that you've been under a terrible strain."

He nodded, still with his back to her. "That will be true enough. We've all been under a strain. All three of us. For these many years. The strain of the narrow, confined lives we lived in this house together. Livia sacrificing most of her adult life for us. And then we, when we became adults, beginning to sacrifice our lives in payment of the debt. A strain, indeed. But I doubt if the authorities, who never knew our dear aunt, will see it that way."

"We'll make them see it."

He faced her at last. His expression was immeasurably sad. "Poor

little Eleanor," he said quietly. "What a burden you will have to live with. An aunt murdered. A brother her murderer. That brother in prison. Or perhaps hanged. There's not much of a future for you, is there? All of those nice young men who came to call—what one of them would have you with a family background like that?"

She went to him, put a comforting hand on his arm. "We won't worry about that," she said. "And they won't hang you, or put you in prison, because I won't let them. I'll see to it that you're properly cared for."

He seemed almost to smile. "Cared for? Where? Someplace for the insane?"

She squeezed his hand. "You're not insane. I never said that."

"Oh yes, I've been under a terrible strain, you said."

"Yes, of course. There have been great strides made in psychology lately. I've read about it. They don't use the term 'insane' anymore."

They gazed at each other. "I didn't foresee it this way," he said finally.

She nodded. "I know. You were trying to spare me. But the shirt gave you away. So it's impossible to spare me now. But don't worry about that, Bertie. I'm stronger

than you think. I'll go to the police with you." She pulled at his hand. "We'll go right now, together."

He hung back, though his burning eyes devoured her. "Wait. Let me collect my thoughts. Give me a few minutes. Just a few minutes. Let me build up my courage. Sit down. There's no hurry."

She humored him, taking her usual chair by the fireplace. Bertie paced several times back and forth across the room, and then he said, "I'm going upstairs."

"Why?"

"To say good-bye to Livia. If we go to the police, it isn't likely they'll let me come back home for a while."

"All right."

He left the parlor. She heard his footsteps on the stairs, then in Livia's bedroom. He walked about a great deal, but she was patient.

It was perhaps ten minutes before he returned. When he appeared in the doorway, he seemed more relaxed, perhaps more resigned.

"Should we have dinner before we go?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No, I suppose not," he agreed. "I really don't have any appetite." He hesitated. "But I would like a glass of sherry. Would you have a glass of sherry with me before we

go to the police?" he asked her.

"Yes," she told him, "I think it would be good for both of us."

Sherry had been the one alcoholic beverage allowed in the house, because Livia had been somewhat addicted to it; sherry after dinner, a pitiful little attempt at elegance in this shabby house. Bertie had often joined his aunt, but Eleanor seldom. She had never particularly liked the taste of sherry, but right now they needed some reinforcement.

Bertie fiddled at the sideboard, his back to her. She heard the nervous clink of glasses. His hands must be shaking. The process seemed to take longer than usual but he managed eventually, bringing two brimming little glasses on a silver tray. She accepted the nearer one. Bertie took the other, and sat in the chair opposite.

"To your health and happiness, Eleanor," he said, lifting his glass and then sipping from it.

"Thank you," she said.

"Aren't you drinking?"

"Yes, of course." She began to take small sips.

"What will you do?" he asked after watching her for a time. "You'll be all alone in this house. I suppose you ought to sell it."

"I think that's something to be decided later."

"A young girl all alone . . .

that's not so good," Bertie said.

"I told you, we're not going to worry about me."

"I shall worry about you. You're the only relative I have in the world now."

"Please, let's don't talk," she begged him. "We've got to go, really."

"Finish your sherry and we'll go."

He was taking full swallows, as if he were trying to gulp down courage, so she tried to drink faster too. The wine warmed her, soothed her. She leaned back in her chair.

"Mind if I have another?" Bertie crossed to the sideboard, refilled his glass, and returned to his place. He was watching her intently. "Drink," he urged her.

"I'm not a drinker," she told him, but she obeyed. The chair seemed softer, cozier. Was he trying to make her drunk so she wouldn't take him to the police? Well, he wouldn't succeed in that. She'd drink this one glass, and no more.

"You'd have been married a long time ago if it hadn't been for Livia," he was saying. "You're beautiful, you know. Quite beautiful. As for me, I probably wouldn't have married anyway. I'm too shy. Girls frighten me usually. I wouldn't have married be-

cause men have to take the initiative. But you're a girl. Men have found you very attractive, haven't they? You have such clear, delicate skin. Men are fond of that kind of skin. And your glossy hair. Like a raven's wing. But your eyes . . . I think your eyes are your best feature, Eleanor."

She had finished the sherry. Bertie was trying to distract her with compliments, or perhaps trying to distract himself—but it was time to go. She rose resolutely from the chair.

It was then, standing on her feet, that she noticed the strangeness—a different feeling in her legs . . . in her whole body . . . a softness . . . a weariness—delayed shock, no doubt.

"Come now, Bertie," she said. "You promised."

He set down his glass and stood up slowly, and was very close to her. He was so much taller than she. His eyes looked down at her, very kindly now, very solicitous. How could the police or anyone imagine Bertie to be a murderer?

"Eleanor," he was asking, "are you all right?"

"Just a little sleepy." Then, from her own words, she knew. She backed away, but the chair halted her retreat. "You put something in my wine, didn't you? Some of Livia's sleeping pow-

ders? You did, now, didn't you?"

He made no denial.

"Why?"

No answer.

She turned from him, circling the chair. Then she started for the door, but he arrived in the doorway before she did, and blocked the way.

She reeled backward, away from him. All her instincts, especially her instinct for self-preservation, fought against the feeling of drowsiness. Her brain rebelled, shooting adrenaline through her body.

"Bertie, you're . . . you're . . ."

"Insane?"

"What are you trying to do?"

For answer, he took the final step toward her, and placed both his hands on her shoulders. "Each man kills the thing he loves," he told her gently.

Her brain understood his words, yet somehow took no alarm. She did not try to struggle from his grasp.

"How many times I've recited those lines to myself," he went on, "thinking about Aunt Livia. 'Each man kills the thing he loves. The coward does it with a kiss, the brave man with a sword.' Aunt Livia was a coward. How much more merciful for her to have disposed of us two little orphans quickly, with a sword. But she

killed us with her kisses, smothered us with her selfless devotion. Love, but a cowardly love. Oscar Wilde was right. A braver love is a kinder love. I loved our dear aunt. You agreed with me on that point, Eleanor. It was a loving hand that gave her the powders, stuffed in the rags, and turned on the gas."

When she spoke, her own voice seemed far away. "And you're going to do the same to me?"

He nodded, his face close to hers. "Because I love you, Eleanor. I love you so much more than I ever did Aunt Livia. You weren't supposed to discover that I killed her. That shirt was stupid of me. Now I must make it up to you. I can't leave you alone with Livia's corpse and a brother in prison. Or even in an asylum. What young man would marry you with your brother in an asylum? We are a doomed family, Eleanor, doomed by our mutual love."

She sagged against him. "I don't want to die," she pleaded, half-sobbing.

His hands glided from her shoulders to her back, and his arms encircled her. She melted into his embrace. So sleepy . . . she remembered Livia saying that her sleeping powders had a slightly unpleasant taste . . . but

the strong taste of the sherry, already unpleasant, had disguised the other . . . Bertie must have put a great deal into her glass . . . she was going to sleep . . . against her will . . . then he would carry her upstairs . . . lay her beside Livia perhaps . . . and the windows would be closed . . . the rags would be stuffed in window cracks . . . the gas would hiss out of the heater . . . and then Bertie would leave . . . sealing the door from the outside . . . perhaps she would toss helplessly on the bed . . . fighting . . . reach out a hand . . . touch Livia's cold hand . . .

"I don't want to die," she moaned against Bertie's chest.

"But you must," he whispered into her ear. "Because it is the best thing for you in these painful circumstances. And because I love you so much."

Gradually, imperceptibly almost, because her senses were so dulled by oncoming sleep, she felt Bertie's embrace tighten. His hands began to press and work against her back, kneading the soft flesh there.

His whispers continued. "My beautiful Eleanor, how I envied those young men when they came to call. Livia drove them away, of course, but surely they came to see you at the library. During

your lunch hour, I suppose. What can a pair of young people do in a library? Not much probably. I tried to imagine, and I envied them . . .”

Then quite suddenly his grip tightened still more. She felt the amazing strength in his thin arms and his hands dug painfully into her back.

From some deep reservoir of ancient horrors came bursting a strength of her own. She straightened, arched her back, pulled one arm free, then the other, pounded and pushed against him. Her maneuvers were so sudden and violent, his surprise so complete, that she managed to break free. Then she confronted him, her breast heaving, her pulse pounding. She was alive, and awake.

He stared at her, his eyes twin pools of fire, but he did not advance. “I love you . . .”

“Love!” She spat the word at him. “Is that what you call love? Kill Aunt Livia and call it love! You killed her so you could be free! And then how would it be? You and I together in this house, was that your plan? And calling it love! You hypocrite! Murderous hypocrite!”

“Hypocrite?” he echoed. Stung by the word, he shrank from her. In his eyes the fires cooled, and his mouth hung slack and weak.

“Oh, you’re so full of love!” Her anger pursued him. “And now you’re ready to kill me. Why? Because you love me? You were killing me because I found out about you! Because I was going to the police! You were ready to kill me to protect yourself!”

He backed farther away, trying to escape her lashes, but she wasn’t finished. There was one last crushing conclusion to fling at him.

“There is only one person you really love, Bertie, and that person is yourself!”

He staggered under the blow. The strength, the righteous certainty, were all out of him now. His gaze fell. His hands went limp.

How long? An eternity, perhaps. Defeated, crumpled, like a puppet whose strings have been cut; then some strange, new, different force seemed slowly to take possession of him. Though he did not look at her again, his shoulders straightened and suddenly, swiftly, with neither a word nor a glance for her, he turned and fled from the room.

She heard him on the stairs, running, climbing the steps two or three at a time. Then she heard the sharp closing of a door. Livia’s door!

Her brain fumbled for a mo-

ment. Then she ran too, to the front hall, up the stairs, lifting her skirts, but not as swift as he had been. Livia's door was shut. She tried the handle, but the door would not give. There were no locks on any of the interior doors in the house, but Bertie must have put something against this door, barricaded himself inside. The door wouldn't budge.

She pounded. "Bertie!"

No answer. Other sounds instead: the windows closing, then smaller, whispery sounds—the rags being inserted into cracks.

"Bertie, don't do it!"

Another sound, so tiny that she heard it not with her ears, but with her intuition—the hissing of gas . . .

She ran again, down the stairs, almost tripping, almost falling over her long skirt; out through the front door, onto the porch, the steps, the path . . .

Where was the closest help? The nearest telephone? The Lamberts had a phone. Or had it been taken out? Mr. Lambert had lost his job, hadn't he? The Crenshaws

had a phone surely, down at the end of the block. Aunt Livia had made it a point never to speak to Mrs. Crenshaw. Something concerning what the woman had said about . . . about their minister?

Eleanor halted there on the front path in the cool night, in the gentle drizzle that wetted her hair, and her face as she lifted her gaze toward the sky. With Livia dead upstairs, could she go running to Mrs. Crenshaw?

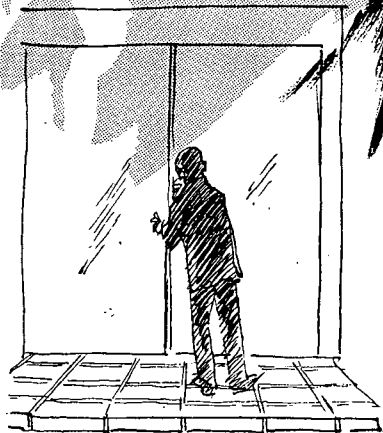
Poor Bertie there, upstairs with Livia—poor confused, tortured Bertie—whom no one would ever understand.

No, the best thing to do was to go directly to the police, just as she'd originally planned. The police station, if she recollected correctly, was a mile and a half away—or two miles. She passed it twice every day on the trolley, but the trolley ran only very infrequently at night. So she'd have to walk. She walked slowly, savoring the dampness and the quiet and the dark and the aloneness.

"Each man kills the thing he loves . . ."



Some nagging sounds may take the edge off one's hour of triumph—or maybe not.



Mrs. Specht's MONSTER

by
Pauline C. Smith

The kid was back. One might think his parents would have had the good sense to sell the house and move away while he was gone, so then when he got out after a year in the boys' camp, they could take him to someplace away from where it had happened right down the street. On the contrary, the father, a big know-it-all type, said this was his home and he wasn't about to leave—and, any-

way, nothing had ever been proved against his son. Anybody could have beaten up the girl that night—what was she doing alone in a dark house—asking for it? Couldn't even see who did it . . . a voice identification, what in hell was that?

The only one who thought Freddie might not have done it was his father—well, maybe his mother, who knows? His mother never had any thoughts, at least none that she expressed. Yet, there was Freddie, back home, with the neighborhood in an uproar and all the householders buying every lock and bolt the hardware store

in the shopping center could offer, and nobody leaving a daughter alone after sundown even behind locked and double-bolted doors.

It was an upper middle-class neighborhood of \$30,000 to \$50,000 homes, well-kept and quiet. The Muhlenbachs were the newest residents, a middle-aged couple who kept to themselves, so the neighbors converged upon them one evening right after dinner in order to offer cautionary warnings as to Freddie, now that he had returned, and explain to them the necessity of providing their house with extra locks, especially since Mr. Muhlenbach was so often away from it.

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Muhlenbach smoothly, "business trips. But who is Freddie?"

Mrs. Muhlenbach said nothing, being rather a mousy little creature who looked frightened even before she knew what it was that should frighten her.

"Well, Freddie—" and the neighbors interrupted each other to tell about Freddie and how he had beat up this girl—who knows why? Probably because she was there . . . As a matter of fact, when the case came up in court, the juvenile probation officer recommended institutionalized psychiatric care, but the father said no way, his son wasn't crazy. The

judge didn't think it was the answer either, figuring that twelve months at a boys' camp ought to straighten out the kid and make a man of him.

The neighbors were't about to buy the theory that a year of isolated regimentation would automatically turn a violent sixteen-year-old boy into a nonviolent seventeen-year-old man, nor, apparently, was Mr. Muhlenbach, once he heard about Freddie. "He might even *kill* the next time," Mr. Muhlenbach announced, showing the first expression on his face the neighbors had ever seen there.

The neighbors shuddered and dispersed, to lock themselves behind the doors of their homes.

Mrs. Specht, from behind the curtains of her window, had watched them convene and was now watching them scatter. "Well, they've told those new people next door about the hoodlum kid over on the next block," she observed to her husband, and he nodded without drawing his attention away from the television screen before him, the picture apologetically pale in the late sunset of summer, with the sound early-evening soft.

Mr. Specht, retired, spent all of his time before the TV set. By

day, he watched the game shows except when one was not available, then he settled for a soap. By night, he viewed detectives, sitcoms, sci fi, horror and mystery without ever touching the news. His wife read two newspapers a day, after which she offered her incontrovertibly conservative analyses, dwelling upon crime and young perpetrators of crime. "Hoodlum kids," she called them, "monsters," biting the labels and spitting them out again . . . glad, she always said after a vicious news item, viciously quoted, regarding a youthful mugger or juvenile rioter, glad that she hadn't had one of those with which to burden the world . . . After all, it was practically patriotic in these days of zero population growth not to have had children, so she was glad she'd had a tipped uterus and glad she hadn't had it straightened like that doctor wanted her to so she could have children when she was young. She always took a long and piercing look at the back of Mr. Specht's head in front of the television screen when she said that, because he had actually wanted her to go through all that to have a *family!*

Mr. Specht resignedly accepted Mrs. Specht's daily postulations of journalistic news, just as he wholeheartedly accepted her comments

regarding local neighborhood occurrences, convinced that she was right—always had been and always would be right.

"A lot of good it will do, telling those new people about the hoodlum kid," Mrs. Specht continued, "with him living right here and running free all over the neighborhood. It's a disgrace."

Freddie did not run all that free. He was, in fact, regimented within the confines of total sports, his father operating on the theory that if the kid ran enough, kicked and threw a ball enough, jostled his game companions on the field and court enough, he'd be too damned tired and sweated out to do anything that could send him back to that boys' camp.

"I'm surprised they let him on those high school grounds—a convict like he is," snapped Mrs. Specht.

The high school, seven blocks away, was well enough endowed with football and baseball fields, volleyball and basketball courts, to keep Freddie active all during the temptingly liberated summer months—especially since his father personally and with steamroller tactics, enrolled him on every practice team available. As a consequence, Freddie could be seen riding his bicycle past the Muhlenbach and Specht homes, trudging

ing on foot or solemnly jogging toward the school and back home again once or twice each day.

He could also be seen, two evenings a week, briskly shuffling his way through late dusk to scheduled games—always alone. If his father desired to sweat his son to civil obedience, he also meant for the neighborhood to understand that his kid was trustworthy enough to hack it without parental supervision.

Freddie, therefore, could be seen making his lone way home in the dark after each game, on those scheduled nights, if anyone were watching—and Mrs. Specht always was.

"He even walks like a criminal," she observed to her husband, who was reviewing a rerun special, "all lumbering and apelike and swinging his arms. He shouldn't be out on the streets at night, a hoodlum like him. It's a shame and a crime and something should be done!"

Something was being done over at the Muhlenbachs where Mr. Muhlenbach appeared to be installing extra locks and bolts on the doors, his hammer lightly tapping through a Sunday afternoon, tapping with token industry, not missed by Mrs. Specht. "When that man does stay around his house long enough to turn a hand,

it is a very weak hand," she noted, speaking sharply against the soft apology of television sound.

"He's just trying to make it look like he's left that dowdy little wife of his safe and sound when he goes gallivanting off to heaven knows where, sometimes not coming back all night or even a couple of nights; high-steps it out to that sporty car of his in the morning with his briefcase banging against his tailored suit and drives gaily off. You can mark my word, he's got a woman or two on the side, a man like that."

Mr. Muhlenbach finished his hammering that Sunday afternoon—then, suave and stony-faced, went out of his way, without fraternizing, to contact the neighbors and inform them that he had now installed the locks and bolts against Freddie, thus leaving his wife safely inside while he was off on his many business trips.

The neighbors nodded in satisfaction, not one of them remembering to ask if he had also secured the sliding glass doors. This was an understandable oversight since, being so unfamiliar with the Muhlenbach house, they were not even sure that it had sliding glass doors, but they did explain in detail the nights and times of Freddie's appearances so that Mr.

Muhlenbach could, if not on a business trip, provide additional protection over and above the extra locks and bolts.

Mrs. Specht, however, was well aware of the Muhlenbach glass doors, for they were on her side and her eyes were often trained upon them. She turned to the back of her husband's head and declared, "Well, he double-locked and bolted every door except the double glass doors, and anyone with any brains knows they're the easiest to get through. A plastic credit card will do the trick unless you install a kind of pluglike thing down on the sill that I was reading about in the paper, a thing that's burglarproof, hood-lumproof. Then you can't get the doors open, no matter what."

The Muhlenbach glass doors, well within Mrs. Specht's scrutiny, were not often in use since Mrs. Muhlenbach rarely ventured forth through any door, and Mr. Muhlenbach, during his irregular visits home and his high-stepping exits from home, always used the front door.

"Interesting," commented Mrs. Specht upon the quiet house next door, and "revolting," as she watched Freddie's lumbering jog to and from school twice each day in the sunshine, twice a week through twilight and darkness.

"He's got shoulders like a gorilla," she noted, "and hands like hams. He'll do something again. You just wait and see. He'll do something awful that'll get him sent away for life," and she added, "I hope," moving away from the window to rest her eyes.

The summer was a hot one so that the neighbors flashed quickly from their air-conditioned homes to their air-conditioned cars for work and to shop by day, and it kept them in their air-conditioned homes by night with the draperies pulled tightly and all the locks and bolts in place against Freddie.

There wasn't much action for Mrs. Specht to observe and comment on from her windows as she changed position for the best and most continuous view, except for Freddie, sweating and panting on schedule, and the irregular appearances of Mr. Muhlenbach blastingly noteworthy, coming or going, as he revved the motor of his sports car in his driveway.

Mr. Muhlenbach never parked his car in the garage but always in the driveway—as if he would announce his arrival or departure with a roar of triumph. Even the neighbors, who did not vigilantly attend their windows as did Mrs. Specht, knew when Mr. Muhlenbach was home and also when he was not home, not caring much

either way now that they had done their duty by warning him of the scourge of Freddie and suggesting the extra locks and bolts, without remembering to add the plug suggestion for the sliding glass doors.

"If that hoodlum so much as sets foot on this property," stated Mrs. Specht to her husband's back, "you are to report him. I'm just waiting for the time that he cuts through lawns to get to his house over on the next block."

However, Freddie's father, having anticipated that such a foot-stepping sin might well land his kid back in the boys' camp, had instructed his son with the same whiplashing severity he had used to lock him into athletic bondage, that he must stay on the public sidewalk to and from the school, turn the corner on the sidewalk, advance to the next corner and, still on the sidewalk, double back three houses on that block in order to enter his own.

"He will do it sometime," spoke Mrs. Specht wishfully. "Sometime," she added, noting Freddie's sweating weariness, "he will cross our lawn to take a shortcut to his home."

The night it happened, Mrs. Specht had turned her attention from the window only long enough to miss the shadow as it

crossed the lawns. "Oh, there will come a time," she remarked to her husband's back, "when he will cut through and you can report him, because that will be a clear case of trespassing, and heaven knows what a hoodlum like that will do once he is a trespasser on other people's property." By the time Mrs. Specht had finished her predictions and returned to her watch at the window, the shadow was already there, dark against the glassy darkness of the neighboring doors.

She held her breath in suspended anticipation and fisted her hands against the sill as the shadow vanished inside the doors with plastic-card swiftness.

The background television sound of muted horses' hooves beat softly upon the dead air of the house and Mrs. Specht, ears alert, eyes wide and attentive, her eternal vigilance attuned to the sights and sounds of the dark night beyond the window, knuckled her fists against the sill and became cataleptically motionless.

As the gallop of horses' hooves rapped in muffled sound and dust-gray color against the glass of the television screen, Mrs. Specht saw the shadow emerge from the glass of next door, and heard the slow-moving slap of footsteps on the sidewalk out front.

She pushed back from the window, arms tight and stiff, the heels of her hands pressed hard against the sill, watching the glass-door shadow move to step high, quickly and smoothly, in a diagonal pattern across lawns toward the rear and to the next block just as a front shadow, hunched and lumbering, jogged into the corner of Mrs. Specht's eye-view and slapped, in slow rhythm along the sidewalk.

She pushed away from the window, drew in her breath and shuddered. Then she turned slowly and cleared her throat before she spoke. "You had better call the police," she informed her husband's back, and Mr. Specht remained immobile.

Raising her voice against the cacophony of TV sound, she repeated, "Call the police. Call them immediately."

Mr. Specht leaned forward to turn the sound to a whisper and rose.

"There has been a murder next door," said Mrs. Specht with the certitude of warped belief and the bias of prejudice. "A murder, do you hear?" she added with triumph. "You call the police, and then you tell them that hoodlum

broke in and entered the house next door and killed that woman and is now on his way home. You tell them that. You tell them it was the hoodlum. You tell them now. You tell them it was that monster . . ."

Mrs. Specht listened only to her own bitter accusation, not for the roar of a sports car from the next block. "You tell them that," she said, knowing that the roar, a homecoming signal, would be broadcast later, at a safer time, in the driveway of the house next door.

"You go now, and call the police," Mrs. Specht instructed her husband.

He went, in absolute trust, and with profound assurance in the honesty and accuracy of his wife's analysis.

While he talked on the phone, Mrs. Specht murmured again her imprecations against "hoodlum kids" and "monsters," glad, as she had so often said before, that she hadn't had one of those with which to burden the world . . . enlarging upon the patriotism of childless mothers . . . glad for her tipped and thankfully unstraightened uterus that had prevented her from bearing a child.

The extermination of a peril may be the first real test of a well-trained student.



The Tyburne Experiment

Climbing over a crumbling sea-wall, Travers found himself on a level field somewhat larger than a croquet court, while beyond this, almost touching the sandy lip of the beach, rose the curious object that had caught his eye from down the shore: a totem pole about fifteen feet tall. The eyes of its topmost symbol, an eagle with a still fierce-looking beak, had once been bright scarlet but now stared blindly out over the choppy gray-green waters of Lake Erie, dismal and forbidding under a darkly overcast sky. Stooping, he could make out the words: *Erected by the Junior Boys*, followed by several sets of initials and an illegible date, all rudely carved in the wooden base.

From the inn he must have walked along the shore for miles, following the irregular pattern of its coves and inlets, and was about to turn back when he saw the remains of a dock: blackened pilings and a few planks not yet swept away by the jostling waves.

He felt an extraordinary surge of emotion as he spotted the initials M. A. T.

Tracing these letters with trembling fingertips, he glanced inland toward the wooded hill and saw the mansion for the first time. Rising out of those regal pines in the midst of spacious unkempt grounds, it was the sort of place one might imagine—if one were of a romantic turn of mind—overlooking some European lake or sea, the Baltic rather than the Mediterranean, for it had a somber austerity about it more fitting to the North.

Following a curving drive hedged with myrtle and wild hyacinths, he was soon close enough to see that the balcony attached to the second story was hanging in splinters, half its carved spindles missing from the balustrade, or broken. Beneath this balcony the ground was terraced behind a low wall of flat rocks, and here he paused to admire the view through the pines to the gray, white-capped lake, half screened by massive drooping willows growing along the shore. Though admirable, it was a cheerless and desolate view, and he shivered, feeling an acute desire to get away from there back to the warmth and chatter of the inn—but those initials . . .

Turning to see what lay up the wooded slope behind the mansion, he caught a glimpse of a face at an upper window. The old man at the inn had told him the camp had been abandoned for years, though his information had seemed oddly sketchy for one who had lived in the area all his life. Some impulse of cowardice urged Travers to bolt, but as he started back across the grassy terrace he was hailed from the same window by a voice both cordial and peppy.

The place must be for sale, of course. Somewhere there was probably a sign and whoever was inside thought the intruder was a prospective buyer, his voice having evinced the unmistakable note of someone with something to sell. Travers waited.

The man who came around the building was younger than Travers—who was seventy-one—and much more vigorous. Lean-faced and slender, he had short-clipped brown hair, an even skimpier moustache, and pale-gray eyes which were oddly dry-looking, as if experience had taught them to absorb rather than to reflect impressions. He wore a uniform somewhat like a scoutmaster's: khaki shorts and shirt and knee socks, the drabness of which was relieved, with undeniable elegance

of effect, by a lime-green bandanna fastened with a silver medallion.

Travers apologized for trespassing, but the man waved this aside. "You're most welcome. I thought you might be one of the chaps we're expecting." The very small question mark at the end of this, along with the "chaps," a slight bow, and the green bandanna, were wispily disconcerting, like the invisible cobwebs Travers kept running into.

"I'm Masterson, by the way. Welcome to Camp Timberlake."

Travers was instantly aware that Masterson was sure he was telling him something he already knew, that everything Masterson said was intended as a sort of password and that he was waiting for Travers to make the appropriate, expected reply. Travers felt an itchy discomfort, a mounting eagerness to escape, and yet all the while he kept thinking of those initials on the totem pole.

"Do you live here?" Travers asked him. "They told me at the inn it was abandoned."

"Deserted, perhaps, but never abandoned. I'm camping out in one of the cabins." He pointed toward the woods to the left and then nodded at the mansion. "This is the mess hall, administration office, and dorm. Will be *again*, I

should say, soon as it's renovated."

It was as good a time as any to declare himself, to let the man know he wasn't whoever Masterson thought he was, and yet some shadowy sense of caution made him hold his tongue.

"Then it's to be a camp again?" he said simply.

"Yes. Or I suppose one might call it a revival center." He laughed at Travers, as if knowing they both shared the joke, then looked away, his dry gray eyes surveying the grounds, the rotting balcony, the overgrown drive, and the ragged shrubbery which was all of a dark, satiny type, laurel and rhododendron mostly, doubtless infested with spiders, and uniformly gloomy. "Were you ever here in the Thirties or Forties? No? You should have seen it then. All the spit and polish. And more isolated then—perforce."

With every remark Travers was treated to one of Masterson's tolerantly patient, gently reproving smiles, as if he knew that Travers was being willfully obtuse and needlessly discreet.

"All those cottages on both sides of us," Masterson continued. "Such a nuisance. One must always be on the lookout for trespassers and busybodies."

This did not make Travers less nervous, and he said quickly, "You

were out here—in the old days?”

“My dear sir, I was one of the first boys.” Like all his other facts and phrases, this too he dropped as if challenging Travers to pick it up, either to ask him what it meant or to acknowledge that he already knew. Travers did neither, still thinking about those initials and wondering, with both fear and hope, if he had at last stumbled upon a real clue. He must be very careful. Perhaps it would be wise to lead Masterson on, let him think that he, Travers, was the visitor he expected.

“Come along—if you’ve time,” said the younger man. “Let me show you something.”

Behind the mansion a tangled path led upward through stately pines to a clearing where the grass had been rudely mowed. Crowning this knoll was a sundial, its numerals traced in concrete, its gnomon made of hand-worked bronze. Masterson knelt and pointed out a string of initials on the pedestal. “The first group,” he said. “Only seven of us. Tyburne had hoped for twelve, but fell short. Rather a tribute, though, to his exalted standards. Not one of his apostles ever defected.”

Tyburne. Masterson had dropped the name as if he had no doubt whatsoever that it would be familiar to Travers.

“During the war the camp was deactivated. Now conditions favor a rebirth. Needless to say, I’m immensely flattered to have been appointed the new counselor.”

Travers studied the face of the sundial on which time, beneath a clouded sky, stood still. “You were here in ’41?”

“Oh, yes. That was the last group before the war.”

When Masterson displayed no curiosity as to why this date was mentioned it showed plainly that he felt this was all part of the game they were playing, each of them feeling out the other.

Travers gazed around at the encroaching woods, the somber pines darker still under swollen purplish clouds, at the mansion half hidden below them. The solitude of the place went to the very bone and soul of him, the silence accentuated by the sudden ghostly cries of birds floating mournfully out of the gloomy forest. He suggested the possibility of rain and Masterson smiled as if this exposed some new, amusing facet of Travers’ extreme prudence.

“Then we must get on with the rest of our little tour, mustn’t we, Mr. . . . ?”

“Temple,” Travers answered, panicked into a lie.

As they passed down the other side of the knoll along a different

path, Travers suddenly stopped. Through the trees he could see two youths, not more than fifteen or sixteen years old, carrying large bales of straw.

Masterson touched his arm. "They're working on the pistol range. Firearms was a major course in the old rough-and-tumble days. Now, of course, it's all so much more sophisticated. One of our good friends in Chicago has pledged a small fortune in electronic equipment. We'll have three bomb technicians on staff, and two karate masters are coming from Japan. If all our friends redeem their pledges of support we should be fully equipped by midsummer."

This last remark was accompanied by another little bow toward Travers, it being even more obvious now that he had been mistaken for one of these "friends."

At the far end of the beach a ruined tennis court was enclosed by a wire fence draped in ivy. Weeds had sprung up through cracks in the clay court between rusted net-posts.

Could it be possible? Travers wondered. *Oh, Mark, Mark, why do I feel so close to you in this place? Were you ever really here? Are your footprints buried somewhere beneath these weeds and*

leaves? On some distant summer day were you playing a carefree game of tennis on this very court? Are those your initials on that totem pole?

After Marian divorced him—Mark was still a baby then—Travers had spent the next twenty years in Santiago, building bridges mostly, never getting back to the States. Occasional letters from friends informed him of the scrapes Mark kept getting into as he grew older. Marian obviously could not cope with him, but when Travers had written repeatedly, begging Marian to send the boy to him in Chile, he had never received even the courtesy of a reply. The last word he'd ever got was a letter from Marian's attorney after her sudden death, informing him that the boy was at some sort of boarding camp on Lake Erie. Then had come Travers' breakdown, the painfully slow years of convalescence, the first heart attack, and then the wearisome, fruitless search for the son he so desperately wanted to find.

"Sorry I can't show you the dorm."

Masterson must have repeated the remark more than once, for when Travers came to with a little start the other man laughed and beckoned him on toward the lake. Away from shore the water

had a greasy, turbid look, and even though it was late spring it looked cold, as if chunks of dirty gray ice floated just beneath the surface.

"Was it the same," Travers ventured to inquire, "in the old days?" He wasn't sure what he wanted to be told, only that it must be something specific, something that would either confirm or deny the appalling apprehensions Masterson's words were planting in his mind.

"The same? Oh, it was more glamorous, more exciting. It's all a science now. Everything is specialized. More brain, less brawn."

Masterson glanced at his watch and continued in a franker tone. "I've somehow got the impression, my dear Temple, that you're rather disappointed in what you've seen."

Travers shook his head. "Not at all. I'm impressed."

"You keep looking at the water. So isn't it time we let our hair down? You're the scuba donor, right?"

Travers had to know the truth about those initials, and if deception were the only way to discover it then he would play that game. So he merely smiled and made no denial.

Masterson visibly relaxed. "Underwater demolition's going to be

one of our most popular courses. We've got Kozinski, you know. He was with Cousteau." He placed a hand on Travers' shoulder. "I've heard rumors that a group is prepared to pay handsomely for the destruction of the Chadago Valley Dam. All they're waiting for is a trained team of experts. By fall we'll have them."

A chill seeped into Travers' backbone. "But the boys . . . so young . . ."

Masterson smiled. "One must get them while they're young. And propensities for antisocial activity are revealed very early in a boy's development. The renegade strain: to hone, refine, educate, and utilize it; that was the whole idea of the Tyburne Experiment. And a humane one, if we're to be honest about it. Society doesn't like to think about its incorrigibles. It has no use for them. It would rather they were exterminated, or stuck away in asylums or prison cells. A pity, really, that the Tyburne Experiment will never be recognized for what it was: a true sociological breakthrough."

There was no backing away now. "Did you ever know him?"

"Tyburne?" Masterson's face lit up. "I knew him when he was Bernie Tyson."

Tyson! To a man of Travers'

generation it was a name more famous than Dillinger's.

"I was working for him before he was deported. I helped him find this place when he was smuggled back into the country. He was out of the rackets then, of course. He devoted all his time to the Experiment. Had a few boys here then, training them. It had always been his dream. I remember one evening—we were having a late supper at Carlotta's in the Loop—he talked about it for hours. 'My dear Masterson,' he said to me, 'there are academies for law-enforcement personnel. Why should we have to rely on pugs and goons and emotional misfits? Why not an academy for antisocial activities?'"

Appalled, and doing his best to conceal it, Travers allowed himself to be conducted along the shore toward the looming totem pole, all the while keeping a nervous eye fixed on the lake. One got the feeling that under its dun-colored surface vicious marine creatures were locked in ferocious, bloody conflict. He didn't want to go near the initials now, didn't want to believe any of this madman's tale. Perhaps Masterson was in fact only a garrulous crank. Certainly there was something mildly eccentric about him, something incompatible, like the sober

uniform and gaudy scarf; a hint, too, of childish make-believe, of dress-up, fantasy. The idea itself was unspeakable, preposterous, and yet . . .

"It was all laid out in Tyburne's will, of course. Every detail of Camp Timberlake. He used to pore over the plans on his deathbed. And it all came true, exactly as he'd visualized it. Parents read the brochure, or they came to be reassured in person. Invariably, they were." He paused, looking smugly over his domain, as if seeing it as it once was, and soon would be again. "Yes, they came and admired the natural beauties of the place. They had visions of Spartan discipline, manly exercise, swimming, tennis, hiking, body-building—and the lecture hall. All most impressive. And the boys were usually wily creatures, adroit by nature, and adept at working their wills upon the parents. They were given their own private tour. Many of them had been in and out of conventional reformatories; they were delighted to find that here their natural propensities for antisocial behavior would not be punished but would in fact be refined, perfected, channeled into specialized skills which would give their lives purpose and their renegade impulses fulfillment. It

was an enormous success. The underworld, if one must call it that, has a constant demand for trained talent. The waiting list of employers is ten times longer than the roster of students."

Travers could hardly trust himself to speak. He wanted desperately to get away from this foul place, to escape back up the beach, to tell someone about this monster, to expose these horrors. Yet he had to know now, had to know the truth about those initials. He must be cagey; he must avoid arousing suspicion. "I know something about these things," he said, nodding. "You see, I once knew a man whose son was enrolled here. At least I think he was."

Masterson placed both palms together in a prayerful attitude, pressed them to his lips as he stopped beside the totem pole. "Is that so? And where is this man now? The father, I mean."

"Oh, he's retired."

Masterson made no reply but only glanced openly at his watch, a gesture that made Travers' sense of urgency more desperate, a feeling he tried to suppress by telling himself it was all a hoax; the man was either a joker or a lunatic, regaling every chance visitor, no doubt, with his mad, impossible dream.

"What of you, Mr. Temple? Have you any children?"

Travers could not help leaning over and pulling away the grass from the initials, feeling a flash of dizziness and a constriction in his chest as he straightened up. He ought to get away now, at once; go back down the beach to the inn, so snug and agreeable and clean and bright; full of pleasant people, no freaks and dreamers. He thought of the dinner he would have, the wine, the salad, the whitefish steak. He should never have started upon this hopeless quest. A camp on Lake Erie! There were surely hundreds of them, perhaps several hundreds over the past two generations. The right one might even be in Canada.

"I have—I had—a son."

When the baby had been born Travers had thought, in a daze of happiness, that whatever else he left undone he would at least have left his Mark upon the world. He recalled how, sheepishly proud, he'd repeated this banal pun to Marian, and her derisive hoot of laughter.

"I'm sorry," Masterson said. "You lost him?"

"Yes. Quite literally."

Marian had had money and influence. Travers had been declared morally unfit. Rightly so, perhaps;

he had never denied it. He had humiliated Marian in a particularly offensive way—he had been young and emotionally confused.

He looked at Masterson and was surprised to see a curious look upon his face: the pseudo-military, quasi-philosophical manner had vanished. He seemed almost physically to soften before one's eyes as he spoke. "But this man you knew, whose son was at Timberlake. You say he is still alive?"

"Alive, but retired."

"How very fortunate. Parents were often considered a peril. They could be meddlesome, you see, when their suspicions were aroused, and so they usually provided our graduates with their first real test. Yes, the parents usually vanished from the scene quite soon and permanently: automobile collisions, fires, explosions, suicides . . ."

The chill reached into Travers' heart and became cold horror. It was madness, madness. Marian had died in an airline crash. An explosion had been reported but never proven. A coincidence, that's all. He pulled back his shoulders. "Well, that proves I was wrong, doesn't it? This man's son couldn't have been at this camp. I can't even recall the fellow's name. But you were here then, you said. M. A. T. You

would have known whose initials those were."

"Oh, I knew all the boys."

"And remember them, I suppose."

"Most of them. They were all, in their ways, memorable. Or they wouldn't have been here, you see."

"And M. A. T.?"

"Let me think." Masterson pondered the letters while Travers clenched and unclenched his fists. His heart beat with crazy rhythm. If only he hadn't walked quite so far; if only he hadn't seen the dock and the totem pole, or the initials or the mansion, or the face at the window.

Masterson's fingertips traced the outline of his lips as he appeared deeply absorbed in thought. At last he snapped his fingers and smiled. "Of course. Young Thorpe. Martin Thorpe. Bonny lad. Remember him well."

Was he lying? Travers felt sure he was; but then, it was all a lie, an insane myth.

Masterson once more consulted his watch, his manner semiofficial, vaguely embarrassed. "I say, I'm afraid I've got to get back to my chores. You're quite welcome to roam about as long as you please, you know, and you must stay for dinner."

Travers put out his hand.

"Thanks, but I must get back to the inn. I've some important phone calls to make."

As he started to turn away, Masterson held him by the arm. "You mustn't try walking back by the shore. The tide will catch you before you're halfway there. There's a trail through the woods. Shortcut, really. I'll have one of the lads guide you."

Ignoring Travers' protests, he led him back up the slope and left him alone while he went to summon the boy.

The youth's appearance was reassuring. He looked as bright and alert as a Boy Scout, and his uniform was just as trim. Still, Travers would rather have risked wet feet than a tramp through those ominously dark woods, but he had no choice. As he followed the boy into the trees he paused and looked up at the mansion, a mere box among those towering pines. Masterson was standing on the terrace under the broken balcony. He waved.

The path was so narrow they had to walk single file, Travers in the rear. The boy didn't say a word. It was uncannily still and the trees so thickly interwoven they were soon engulfed in a deep

umbrageous twilight. Travers could not wait to get out of the woods, to hear the sound of music from the inn and the comforting undersong of rattling dishes and clinking silver; but these were sounds he was destined never to hear.

In the middle of the woods the boy stopped and stepped off the trail.

"What are you doing?" Travers asked.

The boy picked up a stout, heavy tree branch and broke off the narrower end. "Just getting myself a walking stick," he said, giving Travers a broad, innocent smile.

Several hours later Travers' body was found washed up on the shore about a mile below the inn. He was an old man and must, they assumed, have overestimated his stamina. The medical examiner attributed his death to a heart seizure, and the abrasion on his skull to the sharp edge of a rock against which he must have fallen. The seizure itself was presumed to have been brought on by the old man's panic at being trapped by the incoming tide.

This would explain the look of terror on his face.

When everyone else is out of step, it may be necessary to set Them straight.



Anyone but Derek Montjoy would have found it hard to see, much less say, what made this canvas different from all his other tries at the same theme. Yet it seemed plain this painting was not only different but better, not merely better but the beatific culmination. He hadn't destroyed this particular conglomeration of blobs and splotches and dribblings—and

he had ripped the others to bits. He had signed it; a looping Montjoy '74 in one of the central blobs reinforced the whorl motif.

Now that he had brought it into being at last, he found he had not a feeling of fulfillment but one of void. Here, finally, was his *Whorls*. It would no longer haunt him, frustrate him, threaten to craze his mental self in cobweb fissures like a canvas with too much glue in the priming. He sighed, lifted *Whorls* from the easel, wrapped it protectively. Merchandise. Now to try to sell an art dealer on it. He searched his pockets, grimaced.

Ala Teague still lay sleeping under a rumpled blanket on the studio couch. Her purse was on the burlap-covered orange-crate end table: Derek opened the purse, felt around inside, abstracted a subway token. He bent to kiss Ala. His brown Vandyke goatee swept her cheek and her nose wrinkled at the pleasurable irritation.

"It's finished," he said. "Finished."

Eyes shut tight, Ala frowned faintly, made a moue, gave a resigned little grunt, turned over.

With delight Derek watched the contours shift. Gone was the void feeling. His next work would be a sweep of curves. He would call it *Cycloids*.

He couldn't have said what made him turn to Harry Orvexus, of all the art dealers in the Fifties, but he flipped some mental coin and mounted the steps to Orvexus Gallery. With a flourish of defiant pride he unveiled his canvas. The heavy drapes of Mr. Orvexus' private office hushed even the silence.

Orvexus, who had frowned slightly on seeing his visitor was not mild patron but mad painter, let a big smile show.

Derek stiffened and started to cover his canvas.

Orvexus stopped him, soothing a madman. "You don't expect me to make an offer just like that, do you?"

Derek slowly shook his head no.

"What do you call it?"

"*Whorls*."

by Edward
Wellen

Orvexus tilted his head to one side. "Ah. I see, I see. *Worlds*. The planets. The music of the spheres. Just the right note of dissonance."

"*Whorls*," Derek said through his teeth. He spelled it out, fiercely.

Orvexus turned on the sooth. "What's in a name, as the fellow said. That doesn't change the picture. I still like it." He turned quickly from art appreciation to business. "How many more of these you got?"

"None."

"How many more like this can you turn out?"

"None."

The frown returned. No doubt about it—here before him was some serious, basic, mental imbalance. "Don't you want to sell a lot of canvases?"

Derek shrugged. "I suppose. But once I get what I'm after I'm through with it."

"Look, young fellow, you can't make a career out of one painting."

"I know. That's what I was saying. I want to go on to something new. I'm getting right to work on a canvas I call *Cycloids*."

"Ah. The one-eyed giant, the cave, the womb motif, the journey home."

Derek's eyes fired up. He set his

teeth to say, "Cycloids, not Cyclops," and drew breath.

Orvexus beamed. "Raring to go, eh? That's the way, young fellow. Work, work, work. I'm interested in building up a demand. If I thought this was a one-shot I wouldn't touch it, no matter how much I liked it. And this I like a lot."

"Enough to give me an advance?"

"I'm too enthusiastic by nature for my own good. But when I like a thing I like a thing, when I see genius I see genius, when I go I go all out."

He asked Derek's address, the schools he had attended, the teachers under whom he had studied, his techniques, his dreams, the phone number of the ground-floor delicatessen. Derek answered in a daze, high without the weed.

Orvexus drew a cash box from his desk drawer. Derek glimpsed a beautifully deadly revolver; death had its artists too. Orvexus unlocked the box and counted out one hundred beautifully nauseating green dollars into Derek's moist palm.

Orvexus smiled, shook his head at *Whorls* admiringly. "That's the beginning of how much I like this. I'm betting myself I can sell it for five hundred, maybe more."

Derek could have done with the

old artists' crutch of a maulstick as he signed the receipt with a shaky hand.

"Remember, young fellow. Work, work, work."

Derek elbowed himself into his studio. His hands were busy with bags of exotic groceries and esoteric potables.

He stopped short, looked around. Ala had taken her things and gone.

It gave him something of a turn, but he found a Dora to take her place without any trouble.

The significance of Ala's leaving lay in its pointing up (a) the absurdity of the universe, or at least of man's role in the universe, and (b) the inability of man to communicate properly with man—or woman, as the case had been.

He learned this when he ran into Ala a day or two later. She had taken up with a neo-impressionist. When Derek got over the shock of that—a neo-impressionist—he learned that she had believed his "It's finished" had referred to their liaison, whereas he had meant his "It's finished" to refer to *Whorls*.

Derek tried to turn this experience to account by getting something of it into *Cycloids*. It was daub and rip, daub and rip, but he felt he was coming closer to the

achievement that he was seeking.

A fellow tenant was only a little late remembering to relay from the ground-floor delicatessen a phone call from Harry Orvexus. Mr. Orvexus wanted Derek Montjoy to make himself either a bit less or a bit more presentable and be at the gallery for the private showing of *Whorls* at an hour already at hand.

Dora would have liked to accompany Derek but she had promised a poet, who recited bongowise at The Sketch Pad, that she would read the part of the Nihilistic Echo in his latest work "Fugue."

Derek braced himself with a few puffs and floated uptown. He felt really high, and not merely on the weed. He figured he was at last forcing Them to come to terms with him on his own ground.

He did not see the world as other people saw it. To him that was the whole point. Other people would have to see the world as he saw it. *He* was the sane man in a mad world.

When he entered Orvexus Gallery he saw that the showing had already paid off. Heads blocked the canvas of *Whorls* but he made out that Orvexus had stuck a red star on the frame to indicate

that the painting had been sold.

Derek hovered on the rim of the gathering, drinking in the chatter. He heard that the new master of far-out art, Derek Montjoy, had done away with conventional ideas of beauty and propriety. He heard that Orvexus had sold the unfettered feeling and fiery imagery of *Whorls* for a thousand dollars to Raymond Streel, the great collector of moderns, and that Elroy Laird, the great art critic, was going to give the work a rave review, and that all three were in Orvexus' office celebrating the deal. Derek warmed himself at the words he heard. Then, through a momentary gap, he saw the canvas itself. He turned hot—then cold.

He set his teeth. He had a job to do right now: make Them pay.

He moved without drawing notice, made his way to Orvexus' office, eased the door open.

The window was wide to the evening air and traffic sounds drowned out his entering, the chattering in the gallery proper, and his closing the door. Orvexus had opened his bar and he, Streel, and Laird were toasting the event and themselves.

Derek studied their profiles. Orvexus' was an uptilt, speaking the proudness of the successful discoverer of Montjoy. Streel's was a

downtilt, speaking the fond anxiety of the first owner of a major Montjoy. Laird's was a wry diagonal, speaking the mindwork of a man trying phrases to see how they rolled.

"What's-his-name translates imagination into kinetics . . . His brushwork is vigorous, rhapsodic, explosive; heavy impasto and a sweeping brush express unfettered feeling and fiery imagery . . . His forms only spasmodically suggest a realistic basis—and even then, concept appears to overpower objectivity."

Orvexus nodded. His very words. He turned and stared at his beautiful revolver in the artist's hand. He started to shake his head in wonder and protest. The first bullet stilled him.

Even as the echo of the last shot died away, the artist's eye took in the composition of three bodies. Time held still for him. He wiped the gun, set it down where it made a dark accent. He wiped his prints off the drawer pull, still taking in the composition. The arrangement needed only one more touch. He draped Streel's right arm in a curve across Laird's chest to echo the curving mass of Orvexus. There. A work of art.

Time held still for them. *Curtains*. That seemed a good name for the tableau, and a good suggestion for himself.

He slipped behind the bunched drapery just as the stunned inaction ended and the hesitant rush began. The door burst open and the press of the hindmost overcame the caution of the foremost and the room filled. He slipped out from behind the drapery, its stir in the breeze covering his passing, and eased out of the room without drawing notice.

It was all in how you looked at it. No one but the artist noticed the composition; everyone else saw three stiff. Homicide couldn't see it as anything but a botched robbery—some move by one or more of the victims had triggered the shootings and the robber had panicked and fled without touching cash box or wallets. No one could see a man doing in the men who had just started him to fame.

No one noticed any change in the other composition, *Whorls*. No one had seen the artist, between the shootings and the coming of the police, turn his upside-down painting to right side up, reposition the "Sold" star, then step back briefly to admire his work.

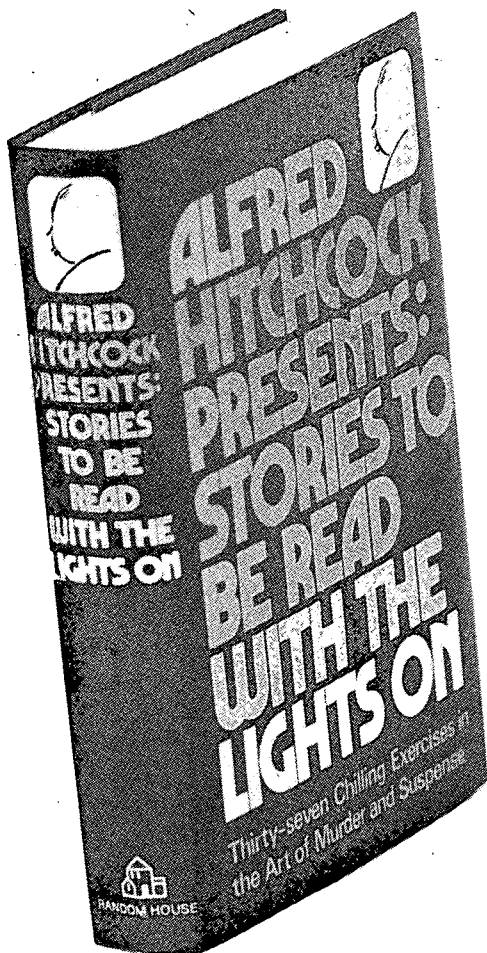
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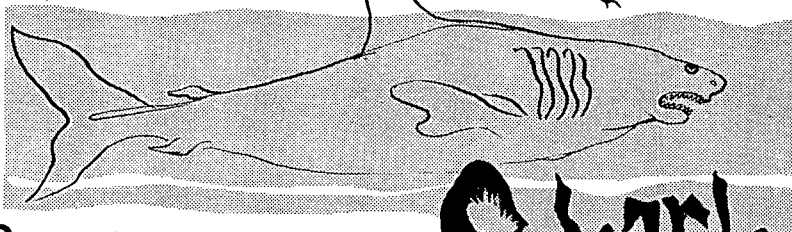
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A Time for



Glen Hawker, sunbathing on Australia's Great Barrier Reef, was dreaming of success and power, when his carefully charted life-plan began to go wrong.

His secretary, Susanne Angier, rolled away from him, kicking up coral sand, and whimpered plaintively as a child, "It's a storm, Glen! We've got to go back!"

Hawker, a young forty, lean, evenly-tanned as a good cigar, sat up and looked over the rock seawall, across South Pacific swells toward Papua and the Coral Sea. Dark clouds were obscuring the sun, turning its light from gold to an ominous dull red that spread across the sky like a jellyfish.

Sharks

Bryce Walton

Wind gusted. It bent palms and wind-stunted pisonia trees, and peppered Hawker's face with sand that stung his pale eyes. A young reef heron scampered across the rocks. Terns, gannets, and sea gulls circled and screamed, and a shearwater bird began its hideous wailing.

Hawker felt a twinge of uneasi-

ness that was brief and unfamiliar, for he had manipulated circumstances and people to his own advantage for so long that he'd grown somewhat smug. Yet the twinge was there, and he even felt a sharp twitch of fear in his stomach.

What if something happened?
What if he failed to meet Foley at the airport?

He shook his head. Nothing like that could happen, not after his long, hard struggle up the greasy pyramid of Foley-Pacific Corporation. He'd been transferred from the States to Australia a year ago, and had just swung a fantastic deal involving offshore natural oil and gas deposits. The coup had brought him to the personal attention of the legendary recluse, H.B. Foley, who had, incredibly, begun dropping Hawker personal memos; and yesterday Foley had sent a wire that he was flying down from the States today. He actually wanted to *see* Hawker!

Hawker was to meet Foley at the Townsville airport this evening at 7:30. They'd dine at the Heron Hotel, and meet big brass from Brisbane to consider Hawker for a high VP post in the conglomerate. So he *had* to be there—no question—and as always, before a big challenge, he needed his day on the Reef, needed

plenty of SSS: sun, sea, and Susanne.

A little wind wasn't going to spook him—no siree. These harmless little squalls hit the Reef daily this time of year and usually blew over in less than half an hour. Susanne, a native Aussie, ought to know that, and he told her so with condescending patience. Still, she crouched under the red beach towel, shivering and pale with fear beneath a golden sheen of oil.

"You can't ever know what the sea'll do," she said. "You can't trust the Reef."

Another gust hit, wet, warm, and stinking of fish and seaweed. It whitecapped the sea, whipped up spray and salt, tore dead palm fronds loose and flapped them off across Hawker's narrow, crescent-shaped bar of coral sand.

Susanne's lips quivered. "My dad and brother knew all about the sea. Grew up fishing the Reef. But a Reef storm took them and they were never found. It'll probably happen to Harry, too, one day . . ." Her voice trailed away wistfully as if she never expected anyone to care.

Hawker frowned. Susanne's husband, Harry, was a damn nuisance. He was in the merchant marine, away at sea for months at a time. The few days he was in

port, Susanne insisted on being faithful to him. This occasional inconvenience annoyed Hawker.

"Storm makes me think of Harry," she said miserably. "I know he suspects us. He's crazy jealous. And if he finds out the truth, who knows what he'll do. He could kill us! He could!"

Hawker squeezed her arm until she winced. "I told you to forget Harry."

"But I—I'm an Aries, too!"

Hawker eyed her with tolerant amusement. Part of her efficient secretarial duties included administering to his personal needs on request. Her abundant figure always responded, as docile, compliant, and humbly obedient as a flaxen-haired doll. Her face was rather long and tragic, her eyes quite sad, but Hawker preferred to overlook other people's problems in deference to his own.

"You're an Aries?"

"Born March twenty-eighth. Mars, my ruler, is in an unfavorable relation to Saturn. My horoscope says to be careful today, or I'm in trouble."

Oh boy, Hawker thought, as black clouds boiled low over the outer Reef. Lightning flickered. Then, after a silence like some kind of alien sound Hawker had never heard before, the wind hit full and roaring. It pushed

Hawker flat. It swirled up sand made of lime dust and salt crystals that choked and half-blinded him. He staggered up, fighting the wind, pawing his eyes. Susanne wriggled, burrowing at the ground like a crab. He half-carried her up the curving bar of sand into a walled shelter of yellow-brown brain coral. She curled up on the white sandy floor in a fetal position. Hawker peered out through a crevice at the storm's fury.

Sand and flying scud hazed the sea and Reef-shelf like fog. Wind bent palm trees almost double. It sent waves breaking over the seawall. In places, it drove boiling surf clear over the top of the sandbar that curved out like a half-moon from the Reef's outer edge into the sea. The wind began to scream. It uprooted brush, broke palm fronds and bamboo shoots and flung them through the air like lances. It slammed seaweed, slimy masses of brown spume, and sea froth over the Reef. It caught up hundreds of flying fish, helpless as butterflies, and hurled them onto the rocks. It tore tough barnacles, limpets, urchins, even rock periwinkles, from the coral, rocketed them through the air and thudded them against Hawker's bulwark like hailstones.

The bulwark itself began to tremble under Hawker. He re-

membered that his little curve of sandbar rested on a foundation of coral rock—frail, porous stuff built up by untold millions of tiny animal skeletons such as starfish and mollusks, cemented together with lime. These undersea structures could be insubstantial. Solvent action of seawater ate away at coral, eroded it with caves and solution holes like a giant sponge. Hurricanes and tidal waves could crumble whole islands of coral, wash them away.

This wasn't a hurricane, however, or a tidal wave—just a simple little old squall already blowing over. It shook him up though, in a strangely terrifying way, similar only to vaguely remembered childhood nightmares of being alone and adrift; small, helpless, insignificant—as nowhere and nothing as a moth or a bit of plankton swirled under the sea.

In twenty minutes the sea, lagoon, tide pools and channels returned to quiet calm. The ocean fell back to slow easy swells. Sunlight shining through fine mist painted a rainbow over the vast coastal Reefs.

Hawker relaxed, enjoying an odd sense of triumph, as though his weathering of nature's elemental threats had somehow conferred upon him additional proof of power and immunity. As he led

Susanne back down the sand to their cozy spot behind the seawall, he glanced back over his shoulder in the direction of the Queensland shore, five miles off across the sloping Reef-shelf. The shore and most of the shelf were obscured by mist, but the lagoon, lying between his curving sandbar and the outer Reef edge, was calm again, sparkling green in the sunlight. Of course, nothing had happened to his jeep. He always drove it out from shore across the Reef-shelf on an old abandoned trail once used by coral poachers, and it was still there, just across the lagoon, partly hidden in the bamboo grove. Everything was just as it had been; nothing to worry about. He still had a good three hours of sun and Susanne before the leisurely hour's drive back to Townsville in plenty of time to meet Foley at the airport.

He pulled Susanne down onto the warm sand, feeling good, powerful, sure of himself. By this evening he'd feel even better, would know just what to say. He had the clincher to spring on them; the corporation merger scheme, guaranteed to raise earnings from zero to \$4.7 million. Twenty minutes later he rolled over and dozed off . . .

At 2:30, Susanne whispered him awake. "Glen, someone else's

here! I saw him—over there!”

Hawker's pale eyes snapped open, steady and cool. “You sure?”

“A man's over in the bamboo.” She pointed into the green grove at the sandbar's tip, fifty feet away.

“No one else comes out here,” Hawker said.

“But I saw his face through those leaves. First the camera—”

“Camera!” Hawker sat up.

“It shone in the sunlight first. Then his face . . .”

Hawker squinted against the sun's hot glare at the three palms and the feathery green bamboo thickets.

Susanne's voice trembled. “He ducked back out of sight. But he couldn't have run out without me seeing him. He's still there.”

Hawker stood up, flexing his fingers, breathing with a hard kind of eagerness. “You think it might be Harry?”

“Didn't get that neat a look through the leaves. But it must be Harry, mustn't it? Oh, wh-what can we do?”

Hawker purposely raised his voice. “Why I'm going to flush me out a scum-minded peeper. If his name's Harry, all the better.”

“Be careful,” Susanne whispered.

As Hawker walked toward the

dense wall of bamboo leaves it trembled like silk in a slight wind. He grinned. He kept in good shape at the Heron Health Club. He knew how to handle himself, had never been afraid to take on anyone, including Ivan Wilson, the bully of P.S. 102. He didn't want to get himself uglified up before his date with Foley, but he couldn't afford scandalous publicity either. He had to take care of Harry and his camera and any candid pictures.

A man suddenly burst out of the leaf wall like an explosion through green glass. Hawker, startled, froze in a tense crouch, but the man didn't come at him. Instead, he loped in a grotesque and somewhat comic manner across the narrow strip of sand to the bank of the lagoon. Heading shoreward, around to the other side of the lagoon, Hawker decided. Maybe he was going for the jeep!

“Stop right there!” Hawker yelled, running.

The lanky figure in dirty ducks, no shirt, hair fringing a bald spot like unraveling hemp, kept going. Hawker ran hard to cut him off. Shell bits, broken coral ground under his sandals. A hermit crab frantically tried to drag its clattering shell out of the way.

The man's long legs gained on

Hawker. He'd soon be around to the shoreward side of the lagoon, and the jeep! Hawker had left his keys in the ignition. He'd left his clothes and briefcase in the back seat . . .

He put on a frantic burst of speed, vaulted a hump of brain coral, hurdled saltbrush. Without the jeep and his clothes he could run into a hassle getting to the Townsville airport in time to meet Foley. This was an isolated stretch of Reef. Crowded resort areas dotted the Great Barrier, particularly in nearby Whitsunday Island, but the Reef was 1,250 miles long, 80,000 square miles, most of it visited only by birds.

No sign of another vehicle around; how had the joker gotten here? By boat? No sign of a boat either.

Hawker strained, but the man, a good sixty feet ahead, suddenly and for no apparent reason, stopped. He sank to his knees on the lagoon's edge. He hugged his camera to his chest and slumped there, shaking his head in slow, mournful resignation.

Hawker ran up, panting, clenching his fists. The man was gaunt and withered, hardly fitting Susanne's awed descriptions of her hefty Harry. Hawker crouched, emboldened, advancing, menacingly.

"Peace, brother." The man raised his hands, palms up, and lowered his head, body bowed in a weary gesture. "Peace, no harm intended. Anger and violence are counterproductive."

Close up, his appearance multiplied Hawker's rage, added a dollop of disgust. The look of the hippie, or whatever they were called now, always disgusted Hawker. He hated the international hippie bums who crawled over the resort beaches every season. He hated their preference for dropping out rather than making good. He hated them for repudiating his religion of success. Aging hippies curdled his hatred with loathing, and this one was pushing forty, with dirty graying hair, stringy around that sweaty bald spot, grimy feet in thonged sandals, faded flowers embroidered on dirty ducks, and a drooping sunflower tattooed on his pale, concave, and hairless chest.

"Your name isn't Harry?"

"No, man. No way."

"What the hell you doing out here sneaking pictures?"

"My thing, man. Find and preserve beautiful people. But I'm a bum—can't win . . ."

Susanne ran up, trailing the beach towel through white sand like a broken wing. "I've seen him before—with Harry."

The man shrugged, rolling his eyes lugubriously. His long face with unkempt beard and sad eyes looked up at Hawker like an eastern mystic begging alms. "Peace, brother. No harm."

Hawker sidled up to him. "You know Harry?"

"Harry had him up to the apartment last month," Susanne shrilled. "Burt somebody—"

"Delgaty," the man said sadly. "Burt Hemingway Delgaty."

"You a friend of Harry's?" Hawker asked.

"Shipmates once," Delgaty said dismally. "But that last voyage was too heavy. Buggy little Italian steamer, the *Apollo*, working the coastal ports of east Africa. Bad scene, man. I burned out, decided to hit the beach, try to get it together."

"Save me from your cruddy life story," Hawker snarled. "You out here to get pictures for Harry?"

"I agreed to that, for an old sea-roving buddy and a little bread. But, man, it wasn't my bag. A turnoff and rip-off. Whole life's been a rip-off. Born loser . . ."

He clicked open the camera, extracted the film cartridge, tossed it over his shoulder into the lagoon. He emptied his pockets—papers, matchbooks, keys, change—but no more film. "See, man. No harm done. Forget I was here.

Blank me out. I'll never creepy-crawl you or anybody again."

"Not with this anyway." Hawker snatched the camera, hurled it after the film.

Delgaty watched the circle of waves spread from where the camera slid down into azure emptiness. "All my savings gone, man. Thought I might earn a little bread with it, make my humble way. But I'd have bombed out regardless—sure loser . . ."

"How'd you know we'd be here?" Hawker demanded. "How did you get out here?"

"Trailed you out on a rented motorbike, brother. Cut the motor, pushed it on over that last half mile after you'd parked so you couldn't hear it. Parked it just the other side of your jeep behind a coral head. Knew all the time, though, I'd blow it. Mother warned me all the time I was growing up I could never do anything right. Wouldn't listen to her, kept trying. But no show, man. Doomed from the beginning."

"What sign were you born under, Mr. Delgaty?" Susanne asked.

Delgaty sighed, ignoring the question.

"You had a good lead on me and could have gotten away. Why'd you stop?" Hawker asked.

Delgaty shrugged woefully. "Saw it was another bummer. Saw

I wasn't going any farther. I can't swim a stroke."

Swim? Hawker blinked in slow puzzlement. Delgaty pointed. Hawker stared to his right around the lagoon and swallowed thickly. Part of his sandbar was gone!

He blinked and stared again. It was still gone. About fifty feet of his sandbar had been washed away by the storm. Over there where it had curved out from the Reef edge around the lagoon there was nothing now but water. So the lagoon was no longer a lagoon. Open on both sides, it had become a channel, a strip of the ocean—and this remaining curve of sandbar was now a narrow bit of island fifty feet from shore.

Hawker rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth, feeling the slide of sweat on his upper lip. He looked at his wristwatch. Twenty until three. Plenty of time. No reason to get uptight. He was an expert swimmer, and it was only fifty feet across the channel to his jeep. No sweat. Ought to start back now, though, take a warm bath and sauna, and have time for a couple of drinks at the Trade Winds before meeting Foley. Just not his day on the Reef. He'd had enough SSS for today anyway—especially enough of Susanne.

Damn Susanne! She was a poor swimmer and never risked deep

water. She'd be scared of the channel. That could be a hassle, getting her across, but maybe the sunken part of the sandbar wasn't submerged more than a few inches or a foot. Lots of sunken sections of the Reef were only a few inches deep, where Susanne could wade across.

He trotted down the sand to check it out. He clambered over rocks dark with sea moss, algae, patches of purple barnacle shells, then he reached the end of the sandbar where it had been broken off by the storm. Looking down through the emerald green water, so clear it almost vanished, he saw myriad rainbow life—blue, red, and acid-green coral gardens, and brilliantly colored fish—clouds of blue-spotted coral trout, surf parrots, gentle moon-eyed batfish, and a shimmering blizzard of three-inch-long sprats. Twenty feet down, he saw what appeared to be the crumbled foundation of his vanished section of sandbar—masses of broken coral that lay under the sea drift like dead bones.

No wading across now or ever, and tomorrow, maybe the rest of his sandbar would crumble into the deeps. He stared uneasily into wavering sea grass. His mouth was dry and he became conscious of the stink of the storm's after-

math—an odor of death and decay; the brackish, soggy reek of seaweed, sea slime, rack, worms, the sulfur smell of sponges, the iodine of rockweeds, the salt smell of rime, dead fish, dead coral, dead shrimp, dead crabs' claws; the limp tentacles of a small dead octopus. Crabs that had been the octopuses' favorite prey were now scuttling about, tearing at the decaying carcass with clicking claws. Thousands of sea gulls screamed themselves hoarse as they dived after dead offal.

Hawker stumbled back. He caught his heel in a tangle of goatsfoot vine and almost fell. He took a deep breath, squinted against the sun's glare and clenched his fists in habitual defiance. He had plenty of time—no reason to be worried. On the other hand, he oughtn't to fool around. He should allow for the unexpected, because this was obviously that kind of day. His jeep might stall or get a flat. He didn't feel like wasting time arguing with Susanne, trying to overcome her fear in order to drag her across the channel, so he'd have to stop off and hire a boat to come back for her. Also, he might run into last-minute delays getting to the airport.

Sand crunched behind him. Hawker jerked around. Delgaty

stood five feet away, leaning on an ugly gray mound of brain coral, scratching exploratively in his beard.

"What are you up to?" Hawker asked.

"Just need to rap a little. About the burn we're in."

"Burn?"

"I mean like we're hung up bad."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Unless somebody happens to show out here on the shelf, or brings a boat in close enough so we can fly a signal of distress, we're hung up here."

Hawker flexed his arms. "A little swim won't hang me up." He turned and called to Susanne who hovered in the shadow of a coral wall out of the sun. "You don't have to swim it, honey. I'll go on ahead and send a boat back for you from Gannet's Cay on Swain's Reef. Won't take more than an hour, okay?"

She nodded like a lost obedient child.

Hawker sneered back at Delgaty. "Maybe they'll take you aboard too, after you're deloused."

"No call to bad-mouth me. I'm just saying where it's at. And, man, you are not about to swim this channel unless you're programmed to self-destruct."

"Why not? What's to stop me?"

"You want to be a carp in a pool of piranhas?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Sharks."

"Sharks!" Hawker swallowed past a sudden hard lump at the back of his throat.

Delgaty squinted at the channel. "Three of the mothers are right close in here, watching us."

Hawker turned stiffly, shading his eyes. Three big dorsal fins were cutting the water in a meandering pattern. They were close in, so close he could see big dim shadows twisting with the channel's swirling current.

Hawker jumped back up the sand in instinctive fear. "Gray reef sharks," he said quickly. "Always gray reef sharks around. They don't bother humans."

Delgaty shook his head. "White sharks, man. Worst man-eaters in the sea. Must be a full dozen of the big mothers cruising the channel. And they're hungry. Came cruising in here after small easy prey. Wouldn't come in through the one open end of the lagoon to feed. Too shallow. They didn't want to be trapped in the lagoon by low tide, but when the storm tore this deeper opening in the coral and put a channel through, they ran in to fill their bellies

with reef fish. Man, that's bad."

What next? Hawker thought. Sweat itched down his face. It loosened a painful ripple down his spine. "You know all about sharks?"

"Nobody does. I know a little."

"How long you figure they'll cruise around here?"

"Hard to say."

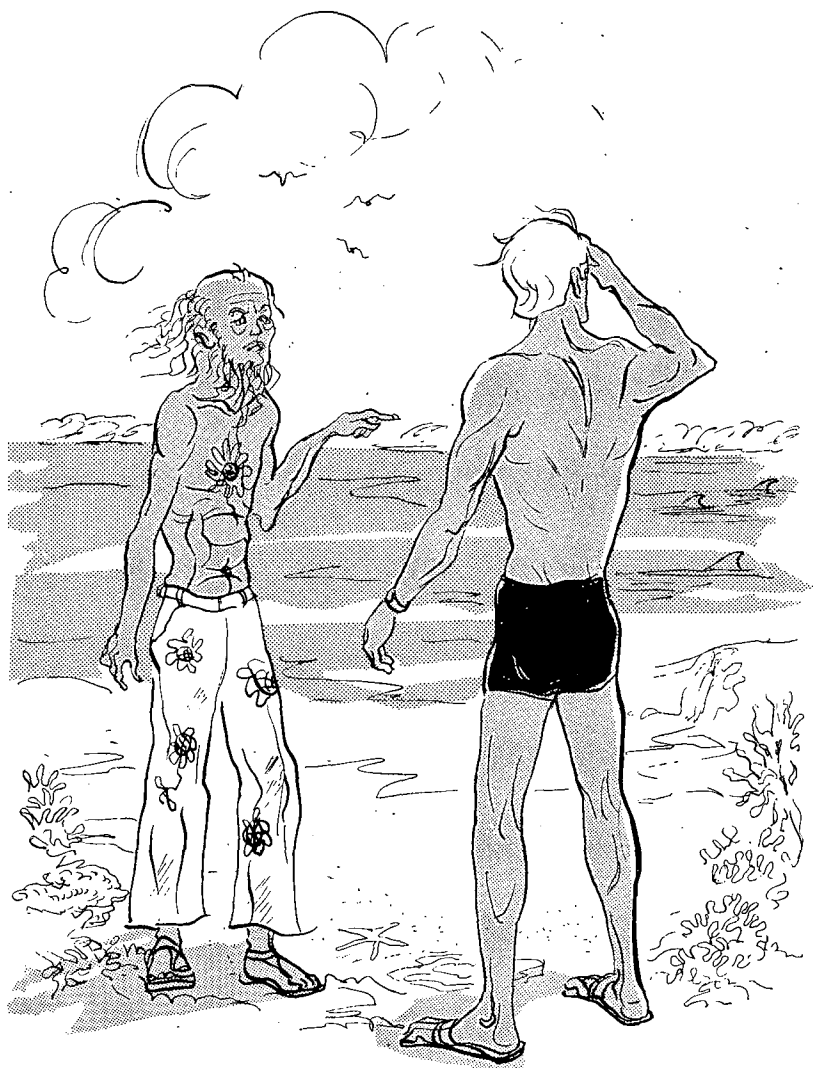
"How long, dammit?"

"Why be in a hurry, man? We're all going there—" He stepped back from Hawker's balled fist. "Maybe five minutes, man. Maybe the rest of the day and night."

Hawker kneaded the back of his neck viciously. The dryness thickened in his mouth and there was a feeling of pressure behind his eyes.

Delgaty went on. "Nobody's really gotten into sharks enough to know their bag. They're not all that predictable. Who knows when they'll split? But my guess is they'll be around a while. They're hungry. They'll take time to clean out the reef fish—and whatever else they can find."

Hawker looked at his watch: three o'clock. He noticed his hands shaking a little, the way his fingers quivered on the ends. If he left now, or in an hour, or even in two hours, he'd still have time to meet Foley at the airport. But the



sharks . . . they posed a problem.

He ran along the water's edge, fighting the unfamiliar threat of panic. He ran past the bamboo

thickets to the tip of the sandbar and started back, feeling oddly detached from the grinding of sand under his sandals and the music of

his wheezing breath muted by heat and wind. He counted a dozen of those sinister dorsal fins, so Delgaty was right. Or maybe there were more of them out there.

He stopped, staring down through the water in cold terror. Where the channel dropped off sheer into the deeps past a coral head, a massive shadow moved in close, so close he could have touched it with a fishing pole. It drifted slowly in the current, a giant living fossil with gray sandpaper hide, vicious underslung jaw, pectoral fins thrusting out from the chest like the swept-back wings of a jet plane. Cold reptilian eyes bugged up through greenish light. It must have been twelve feet long, body thick as an oil barrel, with underwater magnification making it look even bigger—big as a submarine.

Hawker stared in fearful fascination, feeling primal terror playing up his back like icy fingers. The monster's pectorals didn't move—only a slight ruffle of its powerful tail sent it up and around to the right on a slow circle. Its six gill slits pulsed. Its underslung mouth opened in a terrible yawn.

Hawker fell back, his nerves scraped by a bleating cry that he realized vaguely was his own. In-

side the shark's jaw, lying side-wise, was the mangled remains of a huge grouper fish that must have weighed at least 200 pounds!

He sat down and propped his forearms across his knees and watched the channel. He had to get hold of himself. He had to calm down and wait. Delgaty had said he didn't know enough about sharks to guess what they'd do, or how long they'd hang around in the channel. Nobody knew.

They won't be around long though, Hawker mused. There hadn't been all that many reef fish in the lagoon. Twelve big sharks—they must have already cleaned out the little fish. They'd be cruising on any minute now.

He sat and stared and counted the minutes, but they were going too fast. Faster and faster—ticking away like a time-bomb. A few damn sharks couldn't do this to him. They had to go away. Only fifty lousy feet and he'd be across. He could make a running dive in there and just about coast all the way over. The sharks would soon go away, and he still had plenty of time to get to the airport . . .

He thought of what he'd gone through, of all he'd given up for most of his life to get this far, far enough to meet Foley at the airport. One slip on the greasy pyramid and he'd slide clear back to

the bottom—and it'd be one way.

The sun beat down on his back, burned at his eyes. His mind slipped into fevered blankness. His eyes ached and smarted. He closed them, but the lids failed to shut out anything—the sun, the sea, the glare off the water, the prehistoric monsters waiting under the sea. He opened his eyes and counted the dorsal fins. He jumped up shouting, waving his arms. "Delgaty, they're leaving! See, only six fins now. They're pulling out!"

"These six aren't going anywhere for a while." Delgaty sat only a few feet away on the sand, his grimy fingers fondling a pink seashell. "They were running low on reef fish, so half the mothers hauled out so the other six could clean up."

"Won't take them long, will it?"

"Hard to say. Maybe a few hours."

"More likely a few minutes. Hell, there can't be many fish left."

"Okay, man."

Hawker waited, but the minutes clicked ominously in his head—and his nerves coiled and uncoiled until they seemed to burst out through his skin.

He glared sullenly at the water. He still counted six dorsal fins.

They meandered lazily in what seemed a maddening pattern of leisured but steady search. Every now and then one of them glided down to feed. If they ate enough reef fish, Hawker reasoned, they wouldn't be hungry. Then maybe he could risk—

He looked at his watch. Almost 4:30!

He remembered reading about how sharks tore up bathers. He saw that headline again and pictures of chewed bodies dragged up on the Queensland beach. He looked at his watch again. His fingers shook. The sand seemed to come and go at him.

He glared at the water. Something was waiting behind a closed door in his mind, something dangerous, with impatience and fear. He began to feel a faint sensation of suffocation.

He looked at his watch again, then went up on one knee and spun toward Delgaty. "I've got to get across now!"

Delgaty stared.

"You must know some way to get across," Hawker persisted.

Delgaty stared.

"Got a knife?" Hawker asked.

Delgaty slid out a pocketknife but he shook his head. "No way, man, except in the funny books. Nobody in real life fights a shark with a knife. Hide's too thick and

tough. Couldn't cut through it."

"I've read about swimmers scaring sharks off," Hawker said sullenly. "They kick, yell underwater, beat on a can or something."

"No way. Might work for a few seconds. Not long enough."

"But I've got to get across now."

"We could build a fire, give a smoke signal of distress, only we don't have any wood. No driftwood. It never hangs onto these sandbars during a storm."

"I've got to get across now."

"Yeah, man, but—"

"You have to know some way."

Delgaty hesitated. "Well, if we had a decoy, something to keep the sharks busy at one place, while you swam across at another. Say the sharks had plenty of real attractive bait down there by the bamboo grove, and you were at the other end where the coral washed away. You might beat them across."

"How? What kind of bait?"

"I recall where one time a man had the means to kill one shark. He did. And the others fed on their brother and forgot about the man long enough so he could split."

"But we don't have any way to kill one shark."

"No. But maybe we can use

some blood. Just some blood . . ."

Hawker blinked. "Just blood. What—"

"Some of ours, man. A little fresh, human blood will drive a shark wild. They can smell it for miles through water. And they go for it every time. Some of our blood up by the bamboo grove and you might have time to swim across the other end."

Hawker blanched. He'd never cared for the sight of blood, not even the thought of blood. It had always been a weakness—some kind of allergy maybe.

Delgaty waved his knife. "We can open a vein. We soak that towel of yours in the blood, throw it in the channel. I'll do that. You be up at the other end waiting. I owe you a favor."

"You mean you'll use your blood, Delgaty?" Hawker whispered.

Delgaty drew back. "No, man. Not that. I'd like to do that much for you, but no way. I mean it'd burn me out."

"I'll pay for it, Delgaty. I'll pay you back for that camera a thousand times over. Anything you ask. How much blood does it take?"

Delgaty drew back again. The knife blade glinted in the sunlight. "It'd take more than a little and I'm burned out. In poor shape."

Hawker stood tense and stared at Delgaty. Blood pounded at the skin-walls of his face. His body felt hard and just this side of trembling, while something worked in him that felt huge and terrible. "All right," he said calmly. He doubled his right fist and stuck out the arm. "But you have to stick me, Delgaty. I can't do that. I just can't. Delgaty, please . . ."

Delgaty hesitated, slowly licking his lips. Then he picked up the towel and approached Hawker slowly. He put his left hand under Hawker's elbow and pushed the knife out toward the vein, upturned and throbbing inside the elbow. His hand shook. The knife blade seemed to quiver.

Hawker knew what he had to do and how to do it. He knew he had to do it to get across, that getting across was his life. So it was his life or Delgaty's and there was no question about whose life was the more important. He knew, too, that a blood-soaked towel might not be enough, that what he needed was a lot of blood and flesh—a decoy.

He glanced around to make sure that Susanne was still lying out of sight in the shade of those high coral rocks. He didn't want a witness, no matter how morally justified his actions were. He un-

ballled his right fist and lunged forward, outstretched arm stiff, his fingers rigidly extended. The finger ends gouged deep into Delgaty's windpipe and he dropped, writhing on the sand, his mouth pulsing futilely out of his beard like a dying polyp as he tried to suck air into a paralyzed throat.

Hawker twisted the knife out of Delgaty's hand and gave it back to him point-first in the chest, in the center of the tattooed sunflower bloom. A choked cry bubbled out of Delgaty. His body arched up, supported by his heels and shoulders, like a gymnast about to snap up onto his feet.

Hawker, moving in a kind of frenzied dream, stabbed again and again. Then he was panting and straining and dragging Delgaty through the sand to the bamboo grove and out into the shallow water. He swung the body around, shoved it off feet-first, out into deeper current. The water rose to Hawker's thighs—he yelled hoarsely and floundered back, half-falling into the shallows.

The speed of their arrival shocked him. All six of them converged on Delgaty's body. Pectorals spread, tails whipped in an explosion of lashing fury. There was a thrashing and surging. Water churned as Hawker fell back sobbing on dry sand.

Blood clouded the water thick as spilled dye. Fins sliced in mad hunger. Sharp snouts plunged up and down. Pink water churned, and one of Delgaty's feet flew up . . .

Hawker ran wildly toward the other end of the island. His face smarted with salty rawness, and the glare half-blinded him and things looked fuzzy around the edges. Something white darted out of the rocks—Susanne, running, jumping. *Crazy*, he thought.

Up close, he saw a stranger's face on Susanne's body—a hard, thin-lipped face of fury and hate. Then it split open in a scream of rage. "He meant no harm. Why'd you have to kill him?"

She was pulling at him, trying to drag him down, trying to keep him from meeting Foley at the airport. Everything was trying to keep him from meeting Foley at the airport, but he would be there.

"No," he shouted as he tried to break away from her. She kept clawing and raking at his back like some demented female cat. "He tried to swim it and they—"

"I saw you, saw you, you murderer! I hate you. I've always hated you. Who did you ever care about—"

He beat at her and kept running. He smashed back at her and

heard a faint pop like the breaking of an egg and he ran on, free of her, gasping, lurching, limping. He stumbled, fell, got up. He didn't have time to deal with Susanne now. It would be her word against his. He could fix it with her. He could fix anything if he met Foley at the airport.

There! He saw where the sandbar had crumbled away. He'd made it to the other end. Now he'd have time. No sign of dorsal fins; fifty feet and he'd be home free. He ran, feeling the strain pull on his belly, his lungs burn, his heart swell up into his head.

He thought he heard laughter as he sucked in air and made a running dive—crazy laughter, flat as rattling tin cans. Then he hit the water, already kicking his legs, arms thrashing in a frantic crawl.

He'd make it. Sure he'd make it. No sign of sharks at this end and he was already a third of the way across. He thought he heard that crazy laughter again, but it couldn't be Susanne laughing that way, and anyway what would she be laughing at? He looked over his shoulder toward the island as his left arm came back in the crawl stroke.

He didn't see Susanne. What he saw were pink stains unraveling behind him through the green, and he knew he was trailing

blood. He felt the salt water burning in his back like fire, and he knew that his back had been ripped far worse than he'd thought because there was a lot of blood and his whole back was agony.

Then he saw the dorsal fin cutting in toward him—toward his blood.

He screamed. He went under, kicked and screamed at the massive shape that glided in. A tail swung around but the head remained fixed, and cold eyes stared and a jagged-toothed mouth gaped. The big tail swayed once and Hawker felt it like heavy sandpaper rasping an inch of flesh out of his leg.

His head filled with a rough, offbeat roaring. Vague images moved in his mind like clouds, or sea waves, as he felt the terrible finality of impact into his belly and the bubbles spreading up like a column of diamonds, and the last thing he knew was that the bubbles were going up toward the sky and that they were his screams that were without sound . . .

Susanne came down to the wa-

ter's edge. She looked at the pink stains drifting into the shallows. As she looked, the veins in her forehead lifted blue and squirming against her pale skin.

Silver flashes swarmed around her feet in the pink-stained water as hundreds of saltwater minnows were drawn by tiny particles of blood. They sucked at the bloody water. A stingray flapped along the bottom, hungry for the minnows. A baby octopus followed, hungry for the stingray. Dozens of shrimp flickered out through the open spaces of sea grass and attacked the minnows. Something bigger was coming in after the shrimp . . .

Kill and be killed, Susanne thought. *The law of the sea. The law of the world. The law . . .*

She looked at her hands; at her long, newly broken fingernails, with Hawker's blood already beginning to dry under them and flake away like rust.

Then she began to laugh again. She couldn't remember when, if ever, she had felt so free to laugh . . .



It is clear why some men go to their deaths maintaining their innocence.



Byond the eight-foot-high brick wall topped with jagged bits of broken glass embedded in cement, beyond the towering cottonwood trees that swayed in dark rhythm with the night wind, atop a gentle but long rise of rain-glistening grass, sat the Masters house, its cupolas and jutting dormers and gables seeming to lean defiantly into the blasts of wind-driven rain. It seemed the perfect night, the perfect setting, for the simple (therefore successful) murder that was to occur.

Adrian Masters was alone in the

house, and eighteen rooms on three floors was a lot of house in which to be alone. Margaret, his elderly housekeeper-maid, had taken her night off, and everyone else was away, one place or another. Not that Masters was the sort who minded being alone, except for the inconvenience of having to wait on himself.

He'd had an early dinner out, and now he went from the livingroom, down the hall to the large and spotless kitchen to prepare his own usual evening cup of tea. Margaret had thoughtfully

left the kettle out on the sink counter where Masters couldn't miss it, and he removed the lid, placed the expensive and aromatic tea leaves into the strainer and ran water into the kettle. After placing it on the stove to boil, he flipped out the light in the kitchen and walked down the hall to his study.

As soon as the study door opened, a low growl came from a corner and, as the light went on, Major, Masters' hundred-pound German shepherd, cocked his head and erect but graying ears in recognition, then ambled back to lie near the bookcase and return to sleep.

Masters smiled at the dog as he crossed the room to his desk. He'd had the big shepherd since puppyhood, and for the past twelve years the dog had been completely loyal and devoted to Masters and no one else. Major dozed most of the time now, but he was still usually alert and served his purpose as companion and watchdog.

Animals were one thing, but Masters trusted few people. Along with Major's ominous presence and the protective high brick wall that surrounded the grounds, the locks on the outside doors of the house were of the highest, most pick-proof quality. Too, every

night when Masters and his wife retired he threw the switches that activated an elaborate and sensitive burglar-alarm system. In his fifty-odd years, Masters had accumulated enviable wealth to go with an already substantial inheritance.

Wind gusted, blasting sheets of rain against the dark windowpane. It had been raining steadily all day, adding to Masters' boredom. As he went to close the draperies he observed his gray-haired, distinguished Roman features reflected in the window and with unconscious vanity subtly altered his carriage and expression to be more imposing. The heavy red draperies swept together in the center of the window and concealed Masters' reflection, like curtains closing out a scene for an actor.

Masters sat down at his wide desk in the oak-paneled study and toyed idly with a gold-handled letter opener. From another part of the house came a soft creaking sound, but no doubt it was the wind and he paid little attention to it. Deciding after a few minutes that he should make use of his time and get some work finished, he dropped the letter opener onto the desk, rose and walked to the stained-oak panel by the bookcase.

The flat of Masters' hand pressed the panel inward about half an inch, then to the right so that it slid sideways on hidden tracks to reveal the gray steel door of a walk-in vault. After working the combination dial, Masters effortlessly swung out the heavy but counterbalanced thick door and stepped into the safe.

The inside of the vault was about six feet wide by eight feet deep, the walls lined with filing cabinets and shelves that contained strongboxes. Masters pulled open one of the file drawers on the right side of the vault, leafed through the folders thoughtfully for a few minutes, and was reaching for the Summers file when the teakettle came to a boil and began its shrill whistle.

Cursing, Masters removed the file folder, and in that split second a dread ran through him, brought about perhaps by the subtle altering of the piercing whistle. Masters turned, saw a slight shadowy movement outside in the study, realized that someone had cleverly used the whistle of the teakettle to cover the sound of his approach, and in horror watched the heavy vault door swing toward him. A black edge of darkness swept across the interior of the vault with the swinging of the door, encompassed and passed

Masters, and as the locks clicked firm, the inside of the vault was in total darkness, total silence.

Masters had never in his life panicked, but never in his life had he had a harder time fighting panic than now. No one was due in the house until tomorrow morning, when Margaret would arrive to prepare breakfast, and the vault was completely airtight and escape-proof. Add to that the fact that someone had obviously set out to imprison him in the vault until he suffocated, and his chances of breathing fresh air again were negligible. Always one to face things squarely and calculate instantly, accurately and realistically where he stood, Masters arrived at the conclusion that he was a dead man.

A practical joke was the only alternative, and no one played practical jokes on Adrian Masters.

Now that the initial soul-chilling fear was over, he accepted his position fatalistically. He would last somewhere between two and six hours, he estimated, and then he would die of suffocation here in the darkness. He wished now he'd gone to the trouble of having a light fixture installed in the safe even though, when the door was open, the light from the study was adequate to find anything he sought.

Masters groped his way to a corner and slumped down to sit with his back against the shelves. He knew he should remain calm and keep his breathing regular to conserve oxygen.

An hour passed with surprising speed; then two hours. Masters' breath began to rasp.

There was only one great curiosity that remained in his mind now; who had killed him?

Seizing on the question to avoid the impending horror, Masters' disciplined and precise brain began to work.

There were plenty of people with motive. He hadn't got where he was in the business world by being anything but ruthless, a characteristic he'd early discovered in himself in abundance. What dismayed Masters now was that the list of possible suspects in his murder was so long it would be virtually impossible for him to reason out who was guilty.

Then, surprising even himself, he smiled. There was one thing that narrowed the field to workable proportions. Whoever had entered the study and swung shut the vault door had to have got past Major, which meant that the murderer was one of the few people with whom the dog was familiar enough to tolerate without attack. Masters sorted this

condensed list of suspects in his mind.

His wife Lynette; yes, she had motive—Masters' money, along with her freedom. Lynette was twenty years younger than Masters, strikingly beautiful in a long-legged, cold sort of way, and for a long time he had known of her extramarital escapades. Two days ago Masters had seen her off at the airport as she left for New York to visit her sister, a moderately successful off-Broadway actress. Lynette should be over a thousand miles away.

Masters' younger brother Neville; he was an artist, the unlikely combination of a welder of grotesqueries in scrap steel and a painter of landscapes. Though successful in the ways of artists, his art brought him little monetary profit, and the monthly income from the trust fund left by the aunt who had raised both Neville and Adrian sustained him. Money was the motive here. Neville was quite aware of his aunt's will, stipulating that in the event of either brother's death, the principal of the fund would go to the surviving brother, on the condition that the deceased brother's estate and regular monthly payments in the amount at the time of death would go to the deceased's immediate family. Which meant that

Lynette would inherit Masters' possessions plus the monthly income from the trust fund, while Neville would be able to lay his artistic hands on any principal in excess of the amount needed to sustain those payments—fortune enough to engender murder.

Of course Masters and his brother had always got along well enough, at least on the surface—but who knew what went on below a person's surface, even a brother's? Masters was sure there were facets of himself that his balding, aesthetic brother could never suspect.

Masters had telephoned Neville just that morning to see if he wanted to meet for lunch. He had apparently awakened Neville, for the voice on the other end of the line had sounded groggy and had not dispensed with any of Neville's customary dry wit. Neville had declined the invitation, saying that he'd observed a field of sunflowers off the highway yesterday afternoon and was determined to paint them that day before a construction crew nearby destroyed them. Neville was always seeing things he must paint on impulse. He told Masters that if anything happened to force a change in his plans, he would without fail telephone Masters and meet him someplace downtown. Neville

hadn't phoned; his art had consumed him as usual.

The third suspect was Dwayne Rathman, Masters' business partner and the company vice-president. With Masters gone, he could gain complete control of the company riches. Rathman was supposed to be in Saint Louis working on a deal with a textile company so, like Lynette, he was ostensibly out of town.

Masters was sure there was no one else, no other familiar enough member of the household or frequent visitor. There was, of course, his first wife Natalie, but she had remarried and stood to gain nothing but small satisfaction from Masters' death.

Which of the three? Masters could feel the stale air thickening, and he had to draw it into his lungs almost like liquid. He knew his capacity for reason was lessening, and he knew he had less time than he'd originally thought. Willing calm on himself, he concentrated on the problem that helped keep his mind off the inevitable.

Lynette had telephoned long-distance that morning from her sister's in New York. There would be time for her to take a flight here, accomplish her mission and fly back before the body (his body!) was discovered.

If she really had gone to New York; the flight hadn't been non-stop.

Then Masters remembered that he'd talked on the phone that morning to Lynette's sister, Anne, as well as to Lynette. So Lynette really was in New York, and with her sister. Which meant that if she had planned Masters' murder, that brought about unlikelihood of both women being in on it. Otherwise it would be impossible for Lynette to disappear for a long enough period without running the very high risk of Anne finding out about it. Then too, Lynette was the suspect with the weakest motive. Though she had much to gain by Masters' death, compared to her previous situation as a barmaid she was well-off.

Neville and Rathman were something of a toss-up. Neville's outwardly blasé attitude toward material wealth didn't fool Masters in the slightest. No one was that impervious to the temptation of great wealth within near reach, and Rathman, of course, was a businessman like Masters himself. That was why they were partners. Whatever was necessary, Rathman would do.

Then Masters recalled asking about the textile figures. Rathman had talked with him on the phone earlier, promised to get the fig-

ures, and was supposed to call and relate the information to Masters at exactly nine o'clock that evening. Masters stared at his luminous wristwatch dial: eight fifty-two. Like Masters, Rathman was painstakingly punctual. If the telephone rang at exactly nine o'clock, it would almost undoubtedly be Rathman with the textile figures, which would mean he'd be calling long-distance from Saint Louis. He'd have no reason even to try to fake a long-distance call if he knew Masters was already in the vault and suffocating to death.

The question now was, could Masters hear the phone through the thick vault door. He should be able to, he decided, if, as in all probability, the murderer had left the oak panel pushed to the side so the murder would pass as an accident.

At exactly five minutes to nine, Masters felt his way through the darkness and lay with his ear pressed to the edge of the heavy steel door.

If the phone didn't ring at nine, his murderer would probably be Rathman. If it did . . .

Then, softly, almost imperceptibly, the unmistakable, intermittent ring of the desk phone reached the black interior of the vault.

One minute to nine; like Rathman to be a minute early.

Masters backed away from the door, breathing more laboriously from either the tension or lack of oxygen. He didn't know which, tried not to think about it.

Was it possible he could pound on the end wall of the safe and cause someone on the outside of the house to hear? He crawled along the steel floor, reached the wall and scooped papers and boxes from the shelves. He pressed his ear to the wall. No outside sound penetrated. Foolish of him to expect anyone to be there to hear his feeble efforts anyway, he told himself. There was not even a one percent chance that someone—Margaret returning for something she'd forgotten?—would be able to hear. Even with his ear pressed to the steel, he couldn't detect the sound of the rain beating against the outer wall—if it were still raining.

Masters sat back with a start, not even noticing he'd bumped his head on a shelf in the darkness. He knew!

It had rained all day, from mid-morning on, and Neville had told him he was going to paint sunflowers—outside! Impossible! Neville hadn't phoned, as agreed, to meet Masters downtown for lunch, and he certainly hadn't spent the day outside. Yet Masters had to admit that his brother might sim-

ply have been sleepy when he'd talked to him this morning, had simply not remembered what he'd said when he'd awakened later.

Yet Rathman was in Saint Louis, and Lynette was in New York.

It had to be Neville.

Masters felt more satisfaction in having puzzled out the answer than anger at Neville. With the self-honesty of a man near death, he realized that he understood, even condoned Neville's actions. A lot of money was at stake.

Neville, however, would never enjoy that money. As all through their boyhood, Masters had played the game with him and beaten him. The thing now—the over-riding thing—was to ensure that Neville would pay the full price.

Masters felt in his shirt pocket. He had his ball-point pen. For light he had his cigarette lighter—though he knew that burning it in the tiny cubicle would consume precious air and greatly shorten his life. Still, he knew what must be done. His breath came in violent rasps as he felt with trembling, eager fingers, opened a file drawer and withdrew a folder. Then he readied the folder flat on the floor, clicked out the point of his pen, and with his left hand flicked the lever of his cigarette lighter.

It took only half a minute. In careful script he wrote out Neville's name on the blank face of the folder, the accusation, then below that the words, "I saw him close the door." The state had recently reinstated the death penalty for premeditated murder for profit. Those last six words would make sure that Neville, like Masters, would die alone in a tiny cubicle, fighting uselessly for breath.

Even as Masters scrawled his signature, the dwindling flame of the lighter flickered wildly, writhed to hurl fantastic shadows about the vault, then died.

"You saw the oak panel in front of the vault door open, thought something was wrong, so you called us," Lieutenant Garr said patiently to Margaret.

Margaret nodded her gray head in affirmation. "But it wasn't only that, sir. Mr. Masters was always in his study when I came in the mornings to prepare breakfast. I'd always ask him what he wanted and he'd tell me so's I could have it prepared by eight o'clock. There was nobody ever more punctual than Mr. Masters."

The morning was gray, low-skyed, and rain still fell. The

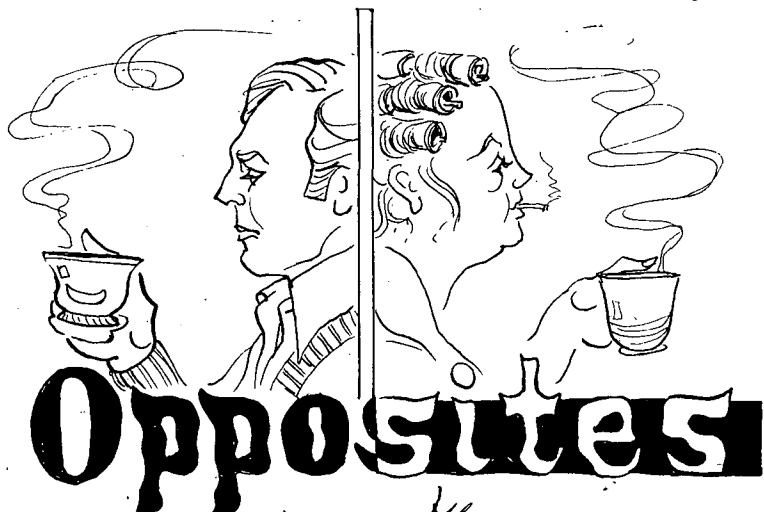
draperies were open now, as was the steel vault door, and the police photographers were just finishing photographing Masters' body, his dying message and everything else inside the vault. The medical examiner had already pronounced Masters dead and left for his coffee and doughnuts.

Margaret cried silently as the police technicians finished and Masters' sheet-encased body was carried from the room. She walked hunched in sorrow behind the stretcher and watched as the attendants opened the front door to move quickly through the rain to the waiting ambulance. As they slipped out of the house, so did Major, who had not had his usual morning exercise.

The big dog ran around the house and romped playfully as always on the huge back lawn, though not for as long a period as he had when he was younger. He favored his right leg, for he still ached from when he had leaped up and struck on the heavy vault door as the sudden scream of the boiling teakettle had startled him awake.

Inside the house, Lieutenant Garr asked Margaret, "Who is Neville?"

This is one situation where the greeting on a doormat is most apropos.



by
Frank Sisk

After rinsing the safety razor under the hot-water faucet, Gilbert Lake returned it to its plastic container. He extracted pink tissue from the dispenser box on the wall and carefully sponged several globs of shaving cream from the rim of the sink. He flushed the used tissue down the toilet bowl. From a frosted green bottle he splashed a pale green liquid into the palm of his left hand. Setting the bottle on the marble counter, he joined both hands in a gentle clapping motion and then raised

them separately to the gaunt hollows of his suntanned cheeks, massaging. He worked the lotion along the finely delineated wings of his straight nose and across the tight strings under his cleft chin, inhaling. The mordant fumes cleared his head and seemed to bring a momentary sparkle to his tired gray-green eyes.

Studying his reflection in the

mirror above the sink, he combed an improvement in the side part of his graying black hair. He then reached for the hand mirror. Obviously it had been last used by Alison because it was now glass-side-down on the counter. He felt the habitual twinge of annoyance. He didn't like to remember how often, during their five years of marriage, he had explained to Alison that placing a mirror face-down was a sure way to scratch the surface. Alison's contention was that a mirror placed face-side-up became a receptacle for humidity and dust.

Gilbert Lake turned his back to the wall mirror and held the hand mirror off center in front of his face. He checked the nape of his neck in the reflection of the reflection. The hair was longer than he used to wear it, curling a little at the ends, but it still looked tidy enough. He laid the hand mirror faceup on the counter.

Dressed for the kind of Saturday it was, in light gray slacks, a powder blue sport shirt and a sleeveless, white Shetland wool sweater, Gilbert Lake left his bedroom and paused at the open door of Alison's. All quiet. He looked in. The unmade bed was empty. One of the bedside lamps was still on, a blurred pink spot under the ruffled pink shade. He stepped in-

side and turned it off. The ash tray on the table under the lamp was loosely packed with lipstick-stained cigarette butts.

Descending the stairs, Gilbert Lake accounted for Alison's being awake and out of bed so early on this particular Saturday morning. It was her mother's birthday. She planned on driving over to Darien with a gift. She never forgot her mother's birthday and never remembered anyone else's.

Alison was sitting in the breakfast nook, a lighted cigarette in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other. She wore a mauve dressing gown that was about ready for the cleaner's. Her reddish hair was rolled up in tubular curlers. Without a penciled definition of the pale eyebrows and minus the blue lids and false lashes, her plump face was blank as a melon.

"Hello, honey," she said. "So you're up."

"Brilliant observation," Gilbert Lake said.

She raised her nearly nonexistent eyebrows. "Oh, so that's the way the wind blows this morning."

"Is the coffee real, Alison?"

"Of course it's real. It's instant, if that's what you mean."

That's what he meant. He strongly disliked instant coffee. Percolated coffee was effortlessly

available here only two days a week—when Effie came to clean the house and made a big pot of it to carry her through the work. Now he began to make a pot of it himself.

“Isn’t this the day you’re going over to Darien?” he asked.

“That’s right, Gil. In a little while. Why?”

“Which car will you want?”

Among the disheveled contents of the bread drawer he found an English muffin. “The station wagon?”

“Yes. I’ve got a box of tulip bulbs for Mother and a box of Spanish iris. No way I could ever get them into the Porsche.”

“The Porsche is fine with me.”

He began to cut the muffin with a fork. “I’m going to the club for some overdue tennis.”

Somewhat bemused, she watched the tines entering and withdrawing from the muffin as he slowly rotated it edgewise. The logic of this operation had always been beyond her comprehension. Whenever she divided a muffin she used a knife, often as not a dull one. “I’ll be back by four at the latest,” she said, still watching his supple hands. “Maybe, for a change, we could go out for dinner.”

“That’s an idea,” Gilbert Lake said, much as one might say,

“Now, if that isn’t a big laugh.”

The impact reached her slowly. When she’d finally absorbed it, she got up from the table with all the hauteur of an insulted child and flounced none too gracefully from the kitchen. Seeing her at this moment from the rear, Gilbert Lake found it difficult to believe that she had once weighed twenty pounds less.

He got the coffee percolating, and the muffin halves toasting. He cleared the table of Alison’s remaining presence: cup and saucer with a cigarette butt extinguished in the saucer’s spillage, grains of sugar, crumbs of something, droplets of cream, a spoon and its moist dark imprint.

After breakfast Gilbert Lake walked across the breezeway to the garage. The cream-colored station wagon and the yellow Porsche stood side by side. On the middle seat of the wagon sat two cardboard boxes of bulbs, each bulb wrapped in burlap. He opened the driver’s door and slid behind the wheel. He turned the ignition key to the accessory position. A rock tune blared from the radio. He turned it off. Alison never turned off the radio. He pressed the button marked RW and watched through the mirror as the rear window rolled down.

Returning to the house, he went

upstairs to brush his teeth. While he was rinsing his mouth he heard Alison's clog-heeled shoes on the stairs, descending. A few minutes later he heard the gunned motor of the station wagon. He was glad now that Alison had always refused to have children.

He went to the club and played tennis and had lunch. He was back home again at 1:35. The front doorbell rang five minutes later. A state police sergeant was standing on the welcome mat. He wore the earnest expression of bad news on his good-looking face. He told his story without embellishment.

Alison was dead. She had driven the station wagon into a concrete abutment at an exit ramp on the Connecticut Turnpike just this side of Bridgeport. Witnesses to

the accident said that she appeared to have lost control of the vehicle, which was traveling in excess of the speed limit.

Alison always traveled in excess of the speed limit, he mused. You could count on it.

"One other thing, Mr. Lake," the sergeant said. "In his preliminary report the medical examiner states that he noticed a symptom of carbon monoxide poisoning. The skin was unusually pink. I go along with this because when I looked the vehicle over at the scene I noticed that the rear window was rolled down. A very unsafe practice in a station wagon. It sucks up the exhaust."

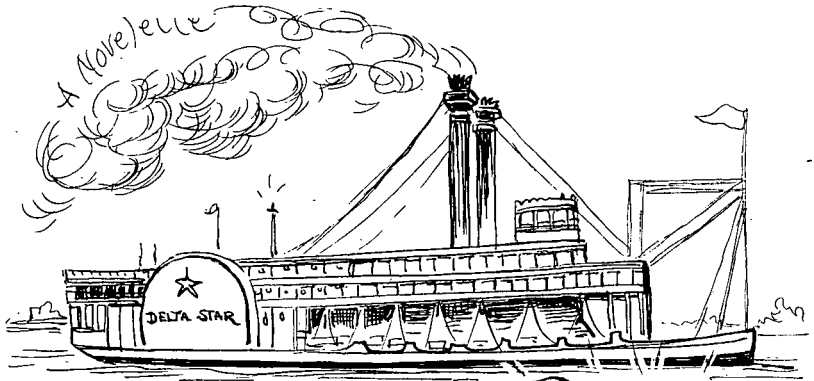
"Good heavens," Gilbert Lake said. "I've warned her about that a dozen times."

And he had.

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The Riverboat Gold Robbery

On a balmy March afternoon in the third full year of the War Between the States, while that conflict continued to rage bloodily some two thousand miles distant, Fergus and Hattie O'Hara jostled their way along San Francisco's Embarcadero toward Long Wharf and the riverboat *Delta Star*. The half-plank, half-dirt roads and plank walks were choked with horses and mules and cargo-laden wagons—and with all manner of humanity in a swirling sea of

color: bearded miners and burly roustabouts and sun-weathered farmers; thick-muscled Kanakas and Filipino farmhands and coolie-hatted Chinese; shrewd-eyed merchants and ruffle-shirted gamblers and bonneted ladies who might have been the wives of prominent citizens or trollops on their way to the gold fields of the Mother Lode. Both the pace and the din were furious; at exactly

four p.m. some twenty steamers would leave the waterfront, bound upriver for Sacramento and Stockton and points in between.

O'Hara clung to their twin carpetbags, and Hattie clung to O'Hara as they pushed through the throng. They could see the *Delta Star* the moment they reached Long Wharf. She was an impressive side-wheeler, one of the floating palaces which had adorned the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers of Northern California for more than ten years. Powered by a single-cylinder, vertical-beam engine, she was 245 feet long and had slim, graceful lines and an air of gracious opulence. The long rows of windows running full length both starboard and larboard along her deckhouse, where the Social Hall and Gentlemen's and Dining Saloons and

Smiling as they approached, O'Hara said, "Now ain't she a fine young miss?" He spoke with a thick, careless brogue, the result of a strict ethnic upbringing in the tough Irish Channel section of New Orleans. At times this caused certain semi-ignorant individuals to underestimate his capabilities and intelligence.

"She is beautiful, Fergus," Hattie agreed. "As fine as any on the Mississippi. How far did you say it was to Stockton?"

O'Hara laughed. "A hundred twenty-seven miles. One night in the lap of luxury is all we'll be having this trip, me lady."

"Pity," Hattie said softly. She was in her late twenties, five years younger than O'Hara; dark-complected, pretty, buxomly feminine. Thick black hair, worn in ringlets, was covered by a lace-decorated

by Bill Pronzini

most of the staterooms were located, refracted jewellike the rays of the afternoon sun. Above, two-thirds of her length stern forward, was the "texas," which contained several luxury staterooms as well as cabins for the packet's officers. Some distance forward of the texas was the oblong structure of the pilothouse.

bonnet. She wore a gray serge traveling dress, the hem of which was now coated with gritty dust.

O'Hara was tall and plump, and sported a luxuriant red beard of which he was inordinately proud and on which he doted every morning with scissors and comb. Like Hattie, he had soft blue eyes; unlike Hattie, and as a result of a

fondness for any type of so-called Demon Rum, he possessed a rather thick and well-veined nose which approximated the color of his beard. He was dressed in a black broadcloth frock coat and vest to match; he carried no visible weapons, but in a specially constructed pocket holster inside his coat was a double-barreled Remington derringer.

The *Delta Star's* stageplank, set aft to the main deck, was jammed with passengers and wagons; it was now twenty till four. A large group of nankeen-dressed men were congregated near the foot of the plank. All of them wore green felt shamrocks pinned to the lapels of their coats, and several were smoking thin, "long-nine" cigars. Fluttering above them on a short pole held by one was a green banner with the words *Mulrooney Guards, San Francisco Company* A crudely printed on it in white.

Four of the group were struggling to lift a massive wooden crate which appeared to be very heavy. They managed to get it aloft, grunting, and began to stagger with it to the plank. As they started up, two members of the *Delta Star's* deck crew came down and blocked their way. One of them said, "Before you go any farther, gents, show us your mani-

fest on that box, if you don't mind."

One of the other Mulrooneys stepped up the plank. "What manifest?" he demanded. "This ain't cargo, it's personal belongings."

"Anything heavy as that pays cargo," the deckhand said. "Rules is rules, and they apply to Bluebellies same as to other folks."

The Mulrooney's face stained a fiery red. "Bluebellies, is it? Ye damned Copperhead, I'll pound ye up into horsemeat!" And he hit the deckhand on the side of the head and knocked him down.

The second crew member stepped forward and hit the Mulrooney on the side of the head and knocked him down.

Another of the Guards jumped forward and hit the second crewman on the side of the head and knocked him down.

The first deckhand got up and the first Mulrooney got up, minus his hat, and began swinging at one another; the second crewman got up and began swinging at the second Mulrooney. The other members of the Guards, shouting encouragement, formed a tight circle around the fighting men—all, that is, except for the four carrying the heavy wooden crate; they promptly struggled up the stageplank with their burden and disappeared among the confusion on

the main deck of the riverboat.

The fight did not last very long. Several roustabouts and one of the steamer's mates hurried onto the landing and broke it up. No one seemed to have been injured in the fairly brief melee, save for the two deckhands who were both unconscious. The mate seemed undecided as to what to do, and finally concluded that to do nothing at all was the best recourse; he turned up the plank again. Four of the roustabouts carried the crewmen up after him, followed by the Guards who were all now loudly singing *John Brown's Body*.

Hattie asked O'Hara, "Now what was *that* all about?"

"War business," he told her solemnly. "California's a long way from the battlefields, but feelings and loyalties are as strong here as they are in the East."

"Who are the Mulrooney Guards?"

O'Hara said he was not quite sure—and a tall man wearing a Prince Albert, standing next to Hattie, stepped forward and smiled and said, "I couldn't help overhearing the lady's question. If you'll pardon the intrusion, I can offer an answer."

O'Hara looked the tall man over and decided he was a gambler; he had no particular liking for gamblers, but for the most

part he was tolerant of them. He said the intrusion was pardoned, introduced himself and Hattie, and learned that the tall man was one John A. Colfax, of San Francisco.

Colfax had gray eyes that were both congenial and cunning, and in his left hand he continually shuffled several small, bronze, war-issue cents—coinage that was not often seen in the West. He said, "The Mulrooney Guards is a more or less official militia company, one of several supporting the Union cause in this area. They have two companies—one in San Francisco and one in Stockton. I imagine the San Franciscans are joining the Stocktonians for some sort of celebration."

"Tomorrow is St. Patrick's Day," O'Hara told him.

"Ah, yes, of course."

"Ye seem to know quite a bit about these lads, Mr. Colfax."

"I am something of a regular passenger on the *Delta Star*, and on the Sacramento packets as well. A man picks up a wealth of information if he travels consistently."

O'Hara said blandly, "Aye, that he does."

Hattie said, "I wonder what the Mulrooneys have in that crate?"

Colfax told her he was afraid he could not answer that particular

question, and seemed about to say something further; but the appearance of three closely grouped men, hurrying through the crowd toward the stageplank, distracted and then held his attention. The one in the middle, O'Hara saw, wore a broadcloth suit and a nervous, harried expression; cradled in both hands against his body was a large and seemingly heavy black valise. The two men on either side were more roughly dressed, and wore revolvers holstered at their hips; their eyes were sharply watchful.

O'Hara frowned and glanced at Colfax. The gambler watched the trio climb the plank and hurry up the aft stairway; then he said quietly, as if to himself, "It appears as if we shall be carrying more than passengers and cargo this trip." He regarded the O'Haras again, touched his hat, said it had been a pleasure talking to them, and moved away to board the riverboat.

Hattie looked at her husband inquiringly. He said, "Gold."

"Gold, Fergus?"

"That nervous chap had the look of a banker, and the other two of deputies. A bank transfer of gold specie, or perhaps dust, from San Francisco to Stockton—or so I'm thinking."

"Where will they keep it?"

"The pilothouse, like as not."

When Hattie and O'Hara had climbed the plank and were crossing the main deck, the three men appeared again on the stairway; the one in the broadcloth suit looked considerably less nervous now. O'Hara watched them go down onto the landing. Shrugging then, he followed Hattie up the stairs to the texas. They stopped at the starboard rail to await departure.

Hattie said, "What did you think of Mr. Colfax?"

"A slick-tongued lad, even for a gambler; but ye'd not want to be giving him a specie to put in a village poor box for ye."

She laughed. "He seemed quite interested in the delivery of gold, if that's what it was."

"Aye, so he did," O'Hara said.

At exactly four o'clock, the *Delta Star's* whistle sounded and her buckets churned the water in a steady rhythm; steam poured lustily from her twin, lofty stacks. She began to move slowly away from the wharf. All up and down the Embarcadero now, whistles sounded and the other packets commenced backing down from their landings. The waters of the bay took on a bedlamatic appearance as the boats maneuvered for right-of-way. Clouds of steam filled the sky; the sound of the pi-

lot whistles was angry and shrill.

Once the palatial steamer was well clear of the wharves, and of other riverboats, her speed increased steadily. Hattie and O'Hara remained at the rail until San Francisco's low, sun-washed skyline had receded well into the distance; then they went in search of a steward, who took them to their stateroom. Its windows faced larboard, but its entrance was located inside a tunnellike hallway down the center of the texas. Spacious and opulent, the cabin contained carved rosewood paneling, red plush upholstery, and polished brass lamps. Hattie said she thought it was grand. O'Hara, who had never been particularly impressed by Victorian elegance, said he imagined she would be wanting to change her things—and that, so as not to be disturbing her, he would stroll about the decks for a while.

"Stay away from the liquor buffet," Hattie told him. "The day is young, if I make my meaning clear."

O'Hara sighed. "I had no intention of approaching the buffet," he lied, and sighed again, and left the stateroom.

He went along to the forward stairway. Two men reached it just as he did, from the direction of the pilothouse, and started down

ahead of him. One was tall and slim, with bushy black hair and a thick moustache—apparently a passenger. The second wore a square-billed cap, well-made clothing, and a look of stern authority. This man was, O'Hara knew, the *Delta Star's* pilot. The packet at this untroubled point in the journey, he surmised, was no doubt in the hands of a cub apprentice.

The door to the Gentlemen's Saloon kept intruding on O'Hara's consciousness as he wandered about the deckhouse, and finally he walked down to the main deck. Here, in the open areas and in the shedlike expanse beneath the superstructures, deck passengers and cargo were pressed together in noisy confusion. O'Hara paused to pack his pipe, and saw the Mulrooney Guards loosely grouped near the taffrail; they were alternately singing such Irish ballads as *The Girl I Left Behind Me* and passing around jugs of what was doubtless homemade whiskey. O'Hara sauntered near the group, stood with his back against a stanchion, and lit his pipe.

One of the nearest Mulrooneys—small and fair and feisty-looking—noticed him, studied his luxuriant red beard, and approached him carrying one of the

jugs. Without preamble he demanded to know if Fergus were Irish. O'Hara said he was, with great dignity, and the Mulrooney Guard slapped him on the back. "I knew it!" he said effusively. "Me name's Billy Culligan, have a drink."

O'Hara decided Hattie had told him only to stay away from the buffet and that nothing had been said about accepting hospitable drinks offered by fellows of the Auld Sod. He took the jug and drank deeply—and then introduced himself, saying that he and the missus were traveling to Stockton on a business matter.

"Ye won't be conducting business tomorrow, will ye?"

"On St. Pat's Day?" O'Hara was properly shocked.

"Boyo, I like ye," Culligan said. "How would ye be wanting to jine in on the biggest St. Pat's Day celebration in the entire sovereign state of California?"

"I'd be liking nothing better."

"Then come to Green Park, on the north of Stockton, twixt nine and ten and tell the lads ye're a friend of Billy Culligan. There'll be a parade, and all the food ye can eat, and all the liquor ye can drink. Oh, it'll be a fine celebration, boyo!"

O'Hara said he and the missus would indeed be there, meaning

it. Culligan offered another drink, which was readily accepted; then he stepped closer and said in a conspiratorial voice, "Step round here to the taffrail just before we come a-steaming into Stockton on the morrow. We've a plan to start off St. Pat's Day with a mighty roar—part of the reason we sent our wives and kids on the *San Joaquin* instead of bringing 'em along on the *Delta Star*—and ye won't want to be missing that either." He laughed boisterously, winked at O'Hara, and took his jug away into the midst of the other Mulrooneys.

O'Hara pondered that last statement for a moment, but its significance escaped him. He shrugged, decided he would find it out in the morning, and returned to the Texas and Hattie.

"Me lady," O'Hara said contentedly, "that was a meal fit for royalty and no doubt about it."

It was some three hours later, and they had just left the Dining Saloon. The evening was mild, with little breeze and no sign of the thick tule fog which often made Northern California riverboating such a hazardous prospect. The *Delta Star*—aglow with hundreds of lights—had come through the Carquinez Straits, passed Chipp's Island, and was

now entering the San Joaquin River. A pale-gold full moon silvered the water, and turned a ghostly white the long stretches of fields on both sides of the river.

Hattie agreed that it had been a sumptuous repast as they climbed the stairs to the texas. They stood close together at the larboard rail, not far from the pilothouse. The area was presently deserted, but a minute or two later they heard footsteps and turned to see the ship's captain and the pilot returning from dinner. The two men had been in the Dining Saloon at the same time as the O'Haras. Touching his cap, the captain—a graying, uniformed man of fifty-odd—wished them good evening. The pilot merely grunted.

Hattie and O'Hara continued to stand looking out at the willows and cottonwoods along the riverbank. Then, suddenly, an explosive, angry cry came from the lighted pilothouse, startling them both. This was followed by muffled voices, another sharp exclamation, and several loud blasts on the whistle.

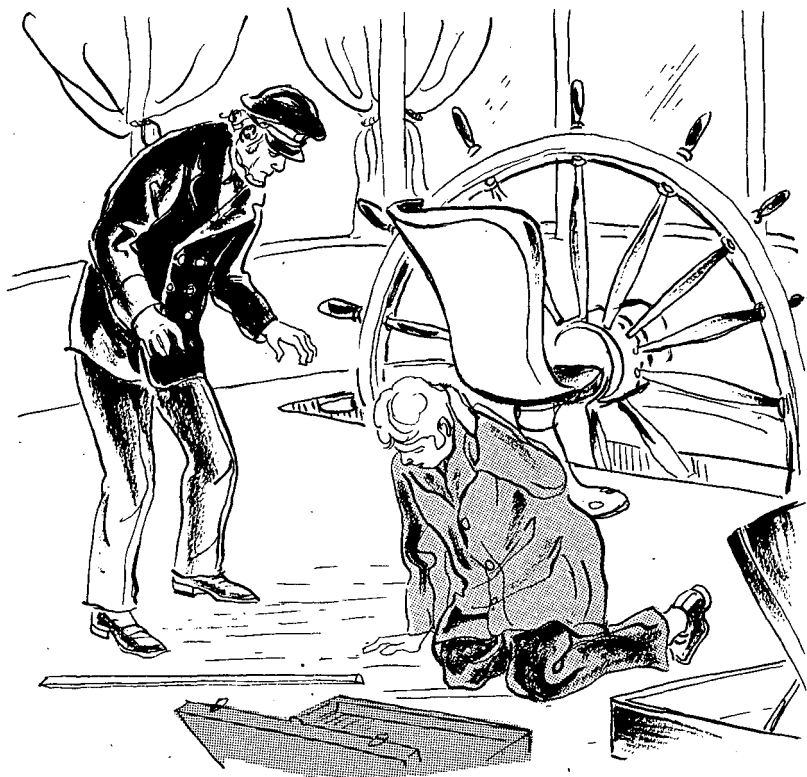
Natural curiosity took O'Hara away from the rail, hurrying; Hattie was close behind him. The door to the pilothouse stood open when they reached it, and O'Hara turned inside by one step. Surprisingly it was almost as opulent

as the staterooms: red plush sofa, red-and-gold window curtains, brass bell and whistle knobs, and a huge, polished-wood wheel directly in front of a high-backed leather seat on which the pilot would sit. O'Hara saw all of this only peripherally, but what captured his full attention were the two men in the center of the enclosure, and the three items on the floor to one side.

One of the men was the captain, bending over the kneeling figure of the second—a young blond individual wearing a buttoned sack coat and baggy trousers and holding the back of his head cupped on one palm. He was moaning softly. On the floor were a black valise, the same one carried aboard by the nervous man in San Francisco; and a medium-sized strongbox, just large enough to have fit inside the valise. Both were open, and both were obviously empty. Another item was a steel pry bar.

Red-faced with anger, the pilot was standing at the wheel, barking orders into a speaking tube. His was the voice which had startled Hattie and O'Hara. The captain was saying, "It's a miracle we didn't drift out of the channel and run afoul of a snag—a miracle, Chadwick."

Chadwick, the young blond



man, said defensively, "I can't be held to blame, sir. Whoever it was hit me from behind. I was sitting at the wheel when I heard the door open and thought it was you and Mr. Bridgeman returning from supper, so I didn't even bother to turn about. The next thing, my head seemed to explode and I don't recall a single thing until you began shaking me a moment ago."

He managed to regain his feet

and moved stiffly to the red plush sofa, hitching up his loose trousers with one hand; the other still held the back of his head. Bridgeman, the pilot, banged down the speaking tube and glanced over his shoulder and saw O'Hara and Hattie. "Get out of here!" he shouted at them. "There's nothing here for you."

"Perhaps, now, that isn't just true," O'Hara said mildly. "Ye've had a robbery, have ye not?"

"That is none of your affair."

O'Hara boldly came deeper into the pilothouse, motioning Hattie to close the door. She did so. Bridgeman yelled, "I told you to get out of here! Who do you think you are?"

"Fergus O'Hara—operative of the Pinkerton Detective Agency."

Bridgeman stared at him, open-mouthed all at once. The captain and Chadwick were staring as well. Finally, in a much softer tone, the pilot repeated, "Pinkerton Detective Agency?"

"Of Chicago, Illinois; Allan Pinkerton, Principal." O'Hara produced a billfold, extracted a card from it, and handed it to the captain. The only official identification carried by Pinkerton operatives, it was a Free Pass issued by the Chicago & Eastern Central Railroad, made out to *Bearer, who is Authorized Agent of Pinkerton Police, Chicago*.

The captain returned the pass. "What would a Pinkerton man be doing way out here in California?"

"Me wife Hattie and me are on the trail of a bandit gang that has been terrorizing Adams Express coaches. We traced them to San Francisco, and now have reliable information they're to be found in the Stockton vicinity."

"Your wife is a Pinkerton agent

as well? A *woman* detective . . . ?"

O'Hara looked at him as if he were a dullard. "Ye've never heard of a Miss Kate Warne, one of the agency's most trusted Chicago operatives? No, I don't suppose ye have. Well, me wife has no official capacity, but since one of the leaders of this gang is reputed to be a woman—and since Hattie has assisted me in the past, women being able to obtain information in places men cannot—I've brought her with me."

Bridgeman said from the wheel, "Well, we can surely use a trained detective after what's happened here."

O'Hara nodded shortly. "Is it gold ye've had stolen tonight?"

"Gold—yes. How did you know that?"

He told them of witnessing the delivery of the valise at Long Wharf, omitting mention of John A. Colfax's apparent interest in the matter; interest did not necessarily connote guilt, and he was reserving judgment for the present. He asked then, "How large an amount is involved?"

"Twenty thousand dollars in dust—an urgent consignment from one of the San Francisco banks to a small, new one in Stockton. The request came by wire just this morning."

"And where was the valise

being kept, then?" O'Hara asked.

The captain indicated a wooden, plush-topped chest. "Inside there. We haven't a safe on board, since we only occasionally carry valuable shipments, and there is always someone here in the pilothouse."

"Would ye be telling me who was present when the delivery was made this afternoon?"

"The three of us, and a friend from Nevada visiting in San Francisco—a newspaperman and former pilot," Bridgeman said. "When I learned he was making the trip to Stockton on the *Delta Star*, I invited him to visit with us as he chose."

O'Hara remembered the tall man who had been in the pilot's company earlier, when the three had met briefly at the stairway. He said, "Can ye be vouching for this newspaperman?"

"I can. His reputation is unimpeachable."

"Has anyone other than he been here in the pilothouse?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Chadwick said that no one had come by while he was there alone; and none of them had noticed anyone shirking about at any time. O'Hara nodded, and bent then to examine the valise and strongbox. Both had been forced, no doubt with the steel pry bar; it

also seemed probable the bar had been used to strike Chadwick from behind. It was an ordinary tool, and the valise and strongbox also told him nothing of importance.

He began moving around the interior of the pilothouse, peering at each fixture. He bent at the waist and waddled forth and back, staring at the oilclothed floor. Then he got down on his hands and knees and looked under the red plush sofa once Chadwick had stood and moved shakily aside.

It was under the sofa that he found the coin.

His sweeping fingers touched it, grasped it, and closed it into his palm. Standing again, he glanced at the coin and saw that it was made of bronze, a small war-issue one-cent piece. A grim smile touched his mouth as he slipped it into his vest pocket.

Bridgeman said, "Did you find something?"

"Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not." O'Hara came forward, pausing thoughtfully near Bridgeman. Through the windshield he was aware of the moonlit waters of the San Joaquin—and, due to the brightly lantern-lit interior and the night's darkness without, of his own dim reflection in the glass; behind the handsome red beard, his face held a stern and yet zeal-

ous appearance as he pondered.

The captain said, "As master of the *Delta Star*, I am responsible for the gold; it would be cowardly to place the task of investigating its theft solely in the hands of another—even a Pinkerton man. One thing I can do more easily than you, Mr. O'Hara, is to question the Texas stewards and passengers; there is the chance one of them might have seen the thief."

"Just as ye think best," O'Hara agreed. "I've another direction which I'll want to pursue for the time being. If either of us should be learning something of importance, we can locate one another without difficulty."

He and Hattie were the first to leave, moments later. They walked rapidly along the larboard rail to the Texas. Hattie, who had been completely silent since their entrance to the pilothouse, started to speak twice—but O'Hara impatiently waved her to stillness on both occasions; he was working now, his mind was sharply active, and he had no desire at that moment to engage in a discussion of matters with his wife, despite her general involvement in his profession. Besides that, there was the coin nestled securely in his vest pocket.

He deposited Hattie at the door to their stateroom and hurried

back to the forward stairway. Once on the deckhouse, he entered the Gentlemen's Saloon: a very long, totally masculine room—no ladies were allowed—with a liquor buffet at one end and private tables and card layouts spread throughout. There were also dozens of sparkling brass cuspidors, a hundred or more men speaking in loud, sometimes profane voices, and a pall of cigar smoke as thick as tule fog.

O'Hara located the shrewd, handsome features of John A. Colfax at a table in a far corner. Two other men sat at the same table: a portly individual with sideburns like miniature tumbleweeds, and the moustached Nevada reporter. They were playing draw poker, and, not surprisingly, most of the stakes—gold specie and a few greenbacks—were in front of Colfax.

Casually, O'Hara approached the table and stopped behind an empty chair next to the portly man, just as Colfax took the current pot with four treys. He said, "Good evening, gentlemen."

Colfax greeted him unctuously, and asked if he were enjoying the voyage thus far. O'Hara said he was, and observed that the gambler seemed to be enjoying it too, judging from the stack of legal tender before him. Colfax just

smiled; but the portly man said in a grumbling voice, "I should damned well say so. He's been taking my money for three solid hours."

"Three solid hours?" O'Hara asked.

"Since just after the three of us met at dinner, yes."

"Ye've been playing without pause since then?"

"Very nearly," the newspaperman said. Through the tendrils of smoke from his cigar, he studied O'Hara with mild blue eyes. "Mr. Colfax left us for ten minutes or so, about an hour ago. Why do you ask, sir?"

Concealing his excitement, O'Hara shrugged and looked at the gambler. "Oh, I was thinking I saw Mr. Colfax up on the texas—just about an hour ago, as a matter of fact, near the pilothouse."

"I'm afraid you were mistaken," Colfax said, and nothing stirred in his cunning eyes; his poker face remained unruffled. Now that the draw game had been momentarily suspended, he had produced a handful of bronze, war-issue coins and begun to toy with them as he had done on the landing that afternoon. "I left our table here only to use the lavatory, and to fetch up a fresh round of drinks. I haven't been on the texas at all

this trip, as a matter of fact."

O'Hara saw no advantage in pressing the matter. He pretended to grow aware for the first time of the one-cent pieces Colfax was shuffling. "Lucky coins, Mr. Colfax?" he asked.

"These? Why, yes, something of the sort. I obtained a sackful of them on a wager once, and my luck has been quite phenomenal ever since." Disarming smile. "I am superstitious about such things."

"Ye don't see many coins like that in California."

"True. They are practically worthless out here. In fact, I've noticed them used to decorate some types of leather goods."

The portly man said irritably, "To hell with lucky coins and such nonsense. Are we about to continue the game, or are we not?"

"Of course," Colfax said. He slipped the war-issue cents into a pocket of his Prince Albert and reached for the deck of cards. His interest in O'Hara seemed to have waned completely.

The reporter, however, was still looking at Fergus with mild curiosity. "Perhaps you'd care to join us?"

O'Hara declined politely, saying he had never had any luck at all with the pasteboards. Then he left

the smoke-filled saloon and went in search of the *Delta Star's* purser. It took him ten minutes to find the man, and an additional fifteen minutes—plus the railroad pass and the bribe of a gold specie—to learn that John A. Colfax did *not* have a stateroom either on the Texas or on the deckhouse. The purser, who knew Colfax as a regular passenger, said wryly that the gambler would customarily spend the entire voyage in the Gentlemen's Saloon, having gullible citizens for a ride.

O'Hara returned to the saloon, not happily, and stepped up to the buffet. He ordered a shot of rye from a bartender in a resplendent handlebar moustache, and rotated the glass on the mahogany surface of the bar.

Colfax *seemed* to be his man, all right—there was the war-issue coin, and the fact that the gambler had left the poker game at about the time of the robbery—and yet, O'Hara was no longer at all certain of it. For one thing, what could he have done with the gold? The weight of twenty thousand dollars in dust was considerable, and he could not very well carry it inconspicuously in his pockets. The Nevada reporter had said that Colfax was only gone "ten minutes or so," which was sufficient time for the gambler to

have committed the theft and returned to the saloon, but precious little time for him to have hidden the gold. O'Hara had already considered and rejected, too, the possibility that the portly man and the newspaperman were accomplices; if the three were conjoined in the filching, the Nevadan would hardly have admitted that Colfax had been gone for *any* length of time.

There were other factors as well. One: gentlemen gamblers made considerable amounts of money in preying on the foibles of honest men, and seldom found it necessary to resort to baser thievery. Two: how could Colfax, while sitting here in the saloon, have known when only one man would be on duty in the pilothouse? It was improbable that the captain and Bridgeman ate dinner at precisely the same time during each voyage. A different, unknown accomplice might have observed the situation and signaled Colfax somehow; but if there really were a confederate, why hadn't *he* done the robbery himself?

O'Hara scowled, tossed down his rye without his usual enjoyment, and ordered another. If Colfax was not the robber, then who was? And what was the significance of the coin he had found in

the pilothouse, under the sofa?

Perhaps the coin had no significance at all, although O'Hara refused to believe it. The one-cent piece was definitely an important clue, but if not to Colfax, to whom did it point? Answer: to no one, and to everyone. Even though war-issue coins were uncommon in California, at least a dozen men presently on board the steamer might conceivably have one or two in their pockets.

O'Hara drank his second rye—and a remark the gambler had made came into his mind: *In fact, I've noticed them used to decorate some types of leather goods.* Aye, now, that was another possibility. If the guilty man had been wearing a holster or vest or some other article adorned with war-issue cents, one might well have popped loose from its fastenings, unnoticed in the tenseness of the robbery.

He slid the found coin from his vest and examined it carefully. There were small scratches on its surface which might have been made by stud fasteners, but he could not be sure; the scratches might also have been caused by any one of a hundred other means—and the cent could still belong to John A. Colfax.

Returning the coin to his vest pocket, O'Hara considered the

idea of conducting a search for a man wearing leather ornamented with bronze war coins—and knew immediately that it was folly. He could roam the *Delta Star* all night and not encounter even two-thirds of the passengers on board. Or he might find three or four or more wearing such a leather article, any or none of whom might have done the theft. Too, there was always the chance that the robber had discovered the loss of the coin afterward, and had packed the article away or got rid of it overboard.

Frustration began to assail O'Hara now, but there was also determination. If any man on board the *Delta Star* could fetch up both the thief and the gold before the packet reached Stockton, that man was Fergus O'Hara; and by damn, if such were humanly feasible he meant to do it!

He left the saloon again and went up to the pilothouse. Bridgeman was alone at the wheel. "What news, O'Hara?" he asked.

"None just yet. Have ye seen the captain recently?"

Bridgeman shook his head. "Young fool Chadwick was feeling dizzy from that blow on the head; the captain helped him to his quarters just after you and your wife left, and then went to make

his inquiries. I expect he's still making 'em."

O'Hara sat on the red plush sofa, packed and lighted his pipe, and let his mind drift along various channels. After a time a memory, an important scrap of information, flickered like a guttering candle—and then died before he could steady the flame. He spent several minutes vainly attempting to relight that candle scrap, and finally, venomously, roared forth with a ten-jointed oath that startled even Bridgeman, who no doubt could profane as ornamentally as any river man in the nation.

Presently the captain returned to the pilothouse. O'Hara stood abruptly, and he and the graying master exchanged identical expectant looks, thus immediately informing each that the other had unearthed nothing of importance. Defeatedly, the captain confirmed that his questioning of texas stewards and passengers had yielded no clue whatsoever; then he said, "I'm afraid there is not much hope any longer, Mr. O'Hara."

"We've not yet come into Stockton," O'Hara reminded him.

The captain sighed. "There are several hundred passengers on board, and we have absolutely no idea which of them is guilty; therefore, we have no conception

of where to find the gold. A search of the steamer and all the passengers before debarkation at Stockton would be impossible; some of these hotheaded miners we have on board would never stand still for it, and there would likely be a riot if we attempted such a lengthy and minute search. No, we shall have to admit defeat; the gold is lost. And so, I fear, is my reputation."

"We've not yet come into Stockton," O'Hara repeated stolidly. He said good-nights and went to his stateroom. It was now somewhat late, and Hattie was asleep—or she had been until the moment he entered. Then she roused instantly and questioned him as to where he had been and what he had learned. Succinctly, he told her.

"Fergus," she said then, "I think the captain was correct in that there is nothing more to be done. In fact, I don't believe you should have become involved in the first place."

O'Hara ignored this remark, considering it to be feminine nonsense. Hattie attempted to continue the conversation, but he would have none of it. Reluctantly, she subsided into silence and eventually sleep.

Lying fully dressed on the second of the cabin's two wide

bunks, O'Hara tried again to resurrect the scrap of knowledge which had buried itself in his subconscious. The more he thought, the more convinced he became that he possessed not only one elusive clue, but others as well; clues which, when combined, would tell him who had committed the robbery and where the gold was—but when the first bright rays of dawn began to filter through the stateroom window, many hours later, he had still not succeeded in locating a single one of them.

As the *Delta Star* came out of one of the snakelike bends of the San Joaquin River, and started down the last long fairway to Stockton, Hattie and O'Hara were standing at the starboard deck-house rail. It was just past seven-thirty—a spring-crisp, cloudless St. Patrick's Day morning—and the steamer would dock in another thirty minutes.

O'Hara was in a dark humor: three-quarters angry frustration and one-quarter lack of sleep. Staring down at the slow-moving waters, frothed by the huge churning sidewheel, he told himself for the thousandth time: *Ye've got the answer, ye know ye do. Think, lad! Fetch one of those clues out into the light . . .*

A voice beside him said, "A fine morning, isn't it?"

Irritably O'Hara turned his head and found himself confronted with the cheerfully smiling face of the Nevada newspaperman. He said, "Is it now? Well, ye sound as if ye have cause for rejoicing. Did ye turn the tables on the gambler Colfax last night and win a hatful of specie?"

The reporter laughed. "No, I'm afraid I lost more than a little. Gambling is one of my sadder vices. But then, a man may have no bad habits and have worse."

O'Hara grunted something unintelligible.

The newspaperman looked out at the broad, yellowish land of the San Joaquin Valley, beyond the tree-lined bank; then he lowered his gaze to the river. "Clear as a mirror, isn't it?" he observed. "It reminds me of the Mississippi when I was a boy, and how we used to swim naked on mornings such as this; even the strapping we would sometimes get for doing it was worthwhile."

Silence from O'Hara. Then, all at once, he jerked upright as if someone had caught hold of his coat collar. He stood that way for several seconds, oblivious to the startled stares of Hattie and the reporter. At last he said explosively, "By damn! By damn,

now!" His face was beaming.

He told Hattie to stay there, spun away from the rail before she could protest, and hurried up the aft stairway to the texas. Excitement pulsed inside him now, having completely obliterated his dark humor. He had his answer finally—not just one clue but all of them. What had been required was a trigger, a key, and the newspaperman's innocuous remarks had done the trick. Not a moment too soon, either . . .

Directly aft on the texas were the small cabins belonging to the *Delta Star's* officers, and this was where O'Hara went. A soft, relieved breath hissed between his lips like valve-bled steam when he discovered that each door had a small brass plate screwed to it, bearing each officer's rank. He located the one he wanted, waited to make sure the taffrail here was completely deserted, and then put his right hand inside his frock coat to touch the derringer in the special holster; with his left, he rapped softly on the panel.

There was, as he had anticipated, no response.

O'Hara knocked again to make sure the cabin was empty, then took out his penknife. The door latch yielded quickly to manipulations from the thin, pointed blade. He slipped inside and shut the

door behind him without a sound.

The cabin was windowless and far more Spartan than the state-rooms; there was a bunk along one bulkhead, a wood-and-leather bench along another, a wooden table, a small wardrobe. O'Hara went immediately to the wardrobe, considering it to be the most likely location. Inside were several articles of clothing, and two other items of considerable importance: a wide leather belt ornamented with bronze war-issue coins, and a battered carpetbag in one corner. He withdrew the bag, worked at the locked catch with his knife, and got it open.

The gold was there, in several small pouches.

O'Hara stared at the sacks for several seconds, smiling. Then he found himself thinking of the captain, and of the bank in Stockton which urgently awaited the consignment. He shook himself mentally; this was neither the time nor the place for rumination, and there was still much to be done. He refastened the carpetbag, hefted it, and started to rise.

Suddenly the cabin door burst open and the apprentice pilot, Chadwick—the man whose quarters these were, the man who had stolen the shipment of gold—stood framed in the entranceway.

He was trembling, his hands

knotted into fists at his sides, his face congealed with fear and anger. He said, running the words together in a frenzied verbalization of his thoughts, "I came back to fetch the bag so I could be one of the first off at Stockton, then heard the moving around in here and knew it had to be you, you damned Pinkerton meddler!" He launched himself across the cabin.

O'Hara had no time to set himself in a fighting stance. Reflexively, he sidestepped and thrust the carpetbag out in front of him in the manner of a shield. Chadwick veered in the same direction without checking his momentum and struck the bag with his shoulder, driving it back against O'Hara's chest; all three then hit the larboard bulkhead with sufficient force to dislodge a small, faded oil painting.

O'Hara spilled across the bunk there, with the carpetbag against his legs, and banged his head on the rounded projection of wood which served as headboard; black streaks of pain blurred his vision. Chadwick was sprawled across him, swinging wildly, and the instinctive arm O'Hara put up was only temporarily effective. One blow finally connected solidly with his bearded jaw, and the black streaks fused into a shim-

mering ebony wall of blindness.

He was still conscious, but he seemed to have momentarily lost all power of movement. The flailing weight that was Chadwick lifted from him; there were scuffling sounds as the cub pilot caught up the carpetbag from the opposite end of the bunk, and then the sharp running slap of boots receding across the cabin and on the deck outside.

O'Hara's jaw and the back of his head began a simultaneous and painful throbbing, and mobility returned pulse beats later. He swung off the bunk, stumbling, shaking his head to clear his vision while Irish fighting blood surged in his ears. When he could see again, he staggered to the door and turned to larboard out of it, the way the running steps had gone.

Chadwick, hampered by the weight and bulk of the carpetbag, was at the bottom of the aft stairway when O'Hara reached the top. The apprentice pilot glanced upward, saw the unexpected proximity of pursuit, and began to run feverishly toward the adjacent, main-deck staircase—banging into passengers, upsetting a fat woman carrying a parakeet in a silver cage. The fat woman began to scream, and men commenced calling indignantly, milling about, as

O'Hara came tumbling down the stairs to the deckhouse.

A bearded, red-shirted miner stepped into Chadwick's path at the top of the main-deck stairway; the apprentice, without slowing at all, bumped him out of the way as if he were no more than a bundle of sticks and went down the stairs in a headlong dash. O'Hara pushed through the sea of passengers and descended after him, cursing eloquently all the while.

Chadwick shoved two startled Chinese out of the way at the foot of the stairs and raced toward the taffrail, looking back over his shoulder. O'Hara thought: *The damned fool is about to jump into the river! And when he does, the weight of the gold will take the carpetbag straightaway to the bottom—and him with it, like as not. I've got to—*

All at once he became aware that there were not very many passengers currently inhabiting the aft section of the main deck, when there should have been a veritable mass of individuals; and that those who were present had split into two groups, one lining the larboard rail and one lining the starboard. Some of these were murmuring excitedly, though not because of Chadwick or O'Hara, and some looked amused or mildly apprehensive. The section of deck

directly behind the taffrail's center was completely clear, the reason for this being suddenly and abundantly obvious to O'Hara.

A small, rusted, and very old cannon had been set up on wooden bracing at the taffrail, aimed downriver like an impolitely pointing finger.

Beside the cannon was a keg of black powder and a ramrod.

Surrounding the cannon were the Mulrooney Guards, one of whom held a firebrand poised above the fuse vent and all of whom were now loudly singing *The Wearing of the Green*.

O'Hara knew in that moment what it was the Mulrooneys had secreted inside their wooden crate, and why they had been so anxious to get it aboard quickly and without having the contents examined; and he knew the meaning of Billy Culligan's remark about planning to "start off St. Pat's Day with a mighty roar." He stopped running and opened his mouth to shout at Chadwick, and at the Mulrooney Guard with the firebrand. He could not recall afterward if he actually *did* shout or not; if so, it was something akin to tossing a burning match into a bonfire.

The Mulrooney cannoneer touched off the fuse. The other Mulrooney Guards scattered, still singing. The watching passengers

huddled farther back, some averting their eyes. Chadwick kept on running toward the taffrail, still looking back.

Then the cannon, as well as the keg of black powder, promptly and deafeningly blew up.

The *Delta Star* lurched and rolled with the sudden concussion, and a great sweeping cloud of sulfurous black smoke enveloped the riverboat. O'Hara caught hold of one of the uprights in the starboard rail and clung to it, coughing and choking. *They used too much powder and not enough bracing*, he thought, and he hoped Hattie had the good sense to stay where she was on the deckhouse, with that newspaperman.

The steamer was in a state of bedlam—everyone screaming or shouting on each of the three decks. The smoke began finally to dissipate, and O'Hara looked in the direction of the center taffrail. Most of it, like the cannon, was missing; the deck in that area was blackened and scarred and splintered.

There did not seem to have been any casualties. A few people had received minor injuries, most of those being Mulrooney Guards, but none of the passengers had fallen overboard and none had been seriously hurt. Even Chadwick had miraculously managed to

survive the explosion, despite his proximity to the cannon when it and the powder keg had gone up; he was moaning feebly and moving his arms and legs, looking like a bedraggled chimney sweep, when O'Hara got to him.

The carpetbag containing the gold had fared somewhat better. Chadwick had been shielding it with his body at the moment of the blast, and while it was torn open and the pouches scattered about, most of the sacks were intact. One or two had been split open, and particles of gold dust glittered in the sooty air. The preponderance of passengers were too concerned with their own welfare to notice; those who did stared disbelievingly, but kept their distance because no sooner did O'Hara reach Chadwick and the gold than the captain and Bridgeman arrived, having left the *Delta Star* in full control of the engineer.

Bridgeman, too, stared with incredulity. "Chadwick?" he said. "Chadwick's the one who stole the gold?"

"Aye," O'Hara answered wearily. "He's the one."

The captain appeared enormously relieved that the gold had been recovered; and at the same time chagrined over both the identity of the robber and what

had happened to the aft, main-deck section of his palatial steamer. In a word, he seemed dazed. He said slowly, "On the way down here, we heard some of the deckhouse passengers talking about one man chasing another just before the explosion. That was you after Chadwick, Mr. O'Hara? You had somehow discovered he was the thief?"

O'Hara said it was, and that he had, and told them briefly what had transpired in Chadwick's cabin. They wanted to know how he had deduced it was Chadwick, but O'Hara did not care to enter into a lengthy explanation just then. He was thinking of Hattie.

He left Bridgeman and the captain still wondering—and to attend to Chadwick and the gold—and went to find her.

Some two hours later, following the docking of the *Delta Star* at the foot of Stockton's Center Street and a goodly amount of additional activity, a small knot of people stood to one side of the landing. O'Hara was the focal point of the group, wearing a clean suit and a bright green string tie. The others, half-circled around him, were an unharmed Hattie, Bridgeman, the captain, the Nevada reporter, a burly man who was Stockton's sheriff, and

two officials of the Stockton Merchants Bank. Chadwick had been removed to the local jail in the company of a pair of deputies and a doctor, and all but a few scattered ounces of the gold was now in the hands of the bank's representatives. The Mulrooney Guards, after minor doctoring and after promising to pay for all damages, had been released with a reprimand as well as the assurance of stiff fines.

The captain, no longer dazed, was saying, "Will you tell us now how you knew it was Chadwick who took the gold, Mr. O'Hara? And how he accomplished it? He refused to say a word to anyone."

"I will," O'Hara said, "if ye gentlemen will not be speaking hereabouts of me profession. I have me assignment to consider."

He was assured that not a word would be uttered to anyone. The reporter said, "Perhaps I might write a piece about the adventure for the *Virginia City Enterprise*; but if so, I promise not to use your name or your vocation."

O'Hara nodded. "Well, then, the long and the short of it." He explained about finding the coin under the pilothouse sofa; his suspicion of the gambler, Colfax; the reasons why he had changed his mind, despite the coincidental evidence which pointed to Colfax;

the gambler's remark about the bronze war-issue cents being used in California to decorate leather goods; the memory scrap which had begun bothering him in the pilothouse, and how he had become sure, during the night's cudgeling of his brain, of the existence of other small but important clues.

Looking then at the newspaperman, he said, "I couldn't pry a one of 'em loose—not until this morning. Then ye come along to give me just the key I needed, and all the doors of me memory opened at once."

The reporter was surprised: "I gave you the key?"

"Ye did," O'Hara told him. "Ye said of the river: *Clear as a mirror, isn't it? It reminds me of the Mississippi when I was a boy, and how we used to swim naked on mornings such as this; even the strapping we would sometimes get for doing it was worthwhile.*"

"Yes, I remember speaking those words. But how could they possibly have acted as a key for you?"

"Only two of 'em, it was. *Mirror* and *strapping.*"

Puzzled frowns.

O'Hara said, "The words began turning over in me mind, and associating themselves with others, ye see. *Mirror* caused me to think

of reflection, and all at once I was recalling the main clue: how I had been able to see a little of me own image in the pilothouse windshield after the robbery. Strapping caused me to think of belt, belt of leather, and leather once again of Colfax's remark concerning the coins as decoration; next I was remembering how Chadwick had his frock coat buttoned up on a warm night like the last, and how he hitched up his trousers as if they were about to fall down—as if he wasn't wearing a belt."

Bridgeman said, "I'm not quite sure we follow all of that."

"Well, first off Chadwick claimed he was sitting in the pilot's seat when he heard the door open, and that he didn't turn about because he thought it was you and the captain returning from supper. But if I was able to be seeing *me* reflection in the glass, Chadwick would sure have been able to be seeing his—and anyone sneaking up behind him as well."

There were murmurs of understanding now.

O'Hara went on. "After Chadwick broke open the valise and the strongbox, his problem was what to be doing with the gold. He couldn't be risking a trip to his cabin while he was alone in

the pilothouse; there was the possibility he might be seen, and there was also the possibility that the *Delta Star* would run into a snag if she slipped a mite too much off course. Do ye recall saying it was a miracle such hadn't happened, Captain, thinking as ye were then that Chadwick had been unconscious for some minutes?"

The captain said he did.

"So, then," O'Hara said, "Chadwick had to have the gold on his person when you and Mr. Bridgeman found him, and while I was there in the pilothouse soon afterward; he couldn't have removed it to his quarters until later, when he claimed to be feeling dizzy. That, now, is the significance of the belt.

"What he did, ye see, was to take off his belt—a wide one decorated with those coins, presently to be found in his cabin wardrobe—and then slip down his trousers and strap the gold pouches above his waist: a makeshift money belt, as it were. He was in such a rush to be doing this, for fear of being discovered, that he failed to be noticing when one of the coins popped loose and rolled under the sofa.

"Once Chadwick had the gold pouches secured, he waited until he heard Mr. Bridgeman and the

captain returning, tending to his piloting duties all the while; then, at the proper moment, he lay on the floor and pretended to have been struck unconscious. He kept his loose coat buttoned for fear someone would notice the thickness about his upper middle, and that he was no longer wearing his belt; and he kept hitching up his trousers because he *wasn't* wearing the belt in its proper place."

Bridgeman said, "Well, I'm damned!" and there were similar exclamations from the others. The captain observed that O'Hara was indeed an estimable detective, congratulations were offered by the Nevada reporter and the other men, and a great deal of handshaking and back-patting ensued as the men milled together for final good-byes.

Hattie said with no small degree of pride, "You really *are* a fine detective, Fergus."

O'Hara said nothing, scowling almost as darkly as he had during the dawn hours, as they now walked along Stockton's dusty main street.

After a time she ventured brightly, "Shall we take a hotel room and then join the Mulrooney Guards in Green Park, as you promised Mr. Billy Culligan?"

"We've nothing to be celebrat-

ing," O'Hara muttered. "Fine detective—fah! Some consolation *that* is."

Hattie was silent this time.

"Me finest performance," O'Hara said, "me greatest scheme yet: the impersonation of a Pinkerton operative, the playacting of a detective when all the time I had it in me black heart to find the culprit only so I could take the gold for meself. It all come to me as we were standing in the doorway of the pilothouse last night, like a flash it did. I recalled the railroad pass I obtained that time in St. Louis, and all the things I learned about detective work from that Pinkerton chap who thought he was bringing me to jail; and I knew pure and true the field was ripe for the sickle."

"There are other ripe fields," Hattie told him. "Such as the real reason we've come to Stockton: the man who is interested in buying Indian land and cheating the government in the bargain."

"Twenty thousand in gold, Hattie," O'Hara moaned as if he hadn't heard her, "and I had it right in me hands when that rascal Chadwick walked in on me! Two more minutes, just two more minutes . . ."

"Providence it was. You were never intended to have that gold, Fergus."

"And what do ye mean by that?"

"It's St. Patrick's Day—or have you forgotten? Fergus, I'm glad you weren't able to take the gold; I'm glad it went to its rightful owners. You should be too, because your heart is about as black as this sunny morning. You only steal from dishonest men, never honest ones. Why, if you *had* succeeded in filching the gold, you would have begun despising yourself in less than a week—not only because it belongs to honest men, but because you would have committed the crime on St. Pat's Day. If you stopped to consider it, you wouldn't commit *any* crime on St. Patrick's Day, now would you?"

O'Hara pondered these words carefully. He was remembering his thoughts in Chadwick's cabin, when he had held the gold in his hands—thoughts of the captain's reputation and the urgent need of the Stockton bank—and suddenly he was not at all sure he *would* have kept the carpetbag if Chadwick had not burst in on him. Confound it, he might just have returned it to the captain. Hattie was right about St. Pat's Day, too; he just wouldn't feel decent if he committed a crime on—

Abruptly, he stopped walking. Then he scowled again and put their bags down. "You wait here,

me lady; there's something I've to be doing before we find a hotel and then set off for Green Park."

Hattie started to ask the inevitable question, but O'Hara was already threading his way through clattering wagons and carriages to where a young towheaded boy was scuffling with a dog. He stopped before the boy and said, "Now then, lad, how would ye be liking to have a dollar for twenty minutes' good work?"

The boy's eyes grew bright. "What do I have to do, mister?"

O'Hara removed from the inside pocket of his frock coat an expensive, gold, American Horologe watch, which happened to be in his possession as the result of frustration, dejection, a momentary lapse of good sense, and extremely nimble fingers. "Take this down to

the *Delta Star* steamboat, and look about for a tall gentleman with a moustache and a fine head of bushy hair—a newspaperman, from Nevada. When ye've found him, give him this watch and tell him Mr. Fergus O'Hara came upon it, is returning it, and wishes him a fine and prosperous St. Patrick's Day."

"Do you know his name, mister?" the boy asked. "It might help me find him quicker."

O'Hara could not seem to recall it, if he had ever heard it in the first place. He opened the watch's hunting-style case, and discovered that a name had been etched in flowing script on the dust cover. He handed the watch to the boy.

"Clemens, it is," O'Hara said then. "A Mr. Samuel Langhorne Clemens . . ."



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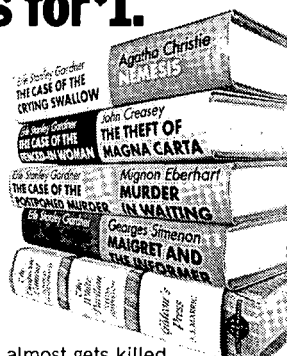
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